Hymns in the Early Church

Treasure No 55: Hymns in the Early Church by John Ferguson:
An article from Bulletin 180

(Adapted from an address given to the William Temple Society, York)

In the ancient Greek world a hymn was a metrical address to a god. In Homer's *Iliad* (1.472–4) we read:

> They all day long sought to appease the god in song,
> Chanting the glorious paean, they the Achaeans' sons,
> Hymning the god who strikes from far; he, hearing, was glad.

The god there is Apollo, and a paean is a hymn addressed to Apollo as healer. Again in Hesiod (*Works and Days* 656–7), who, Herodotus tells us, was with Homer the greatest formative force upon Greek religious thinking, we find

> It is my boast
> That I won a tripod with handles, first prize for a hymn.

The ancients claimed that the earliest hymns were composed in dactylic hexameters, that is to say in 4/4 time. They would comprise a list of the names and titles of the god, which itself suggests an element of magical or semi-magical compulsion, a recital of his achievements, and a short prayer. The so-called 'Homeric' hymns are of this kind. They were certainly not by the author of *The Iliad*, and may have been composed for literary competitions (though we must not make too sharp a distinction between sacred and secular). We get a glimpse of this in the *Hymn to Aphrodite* (6.19–20):

> Greetings, sweet shy goddess. Grant me in this competition
> To win first prize. Shape my song for me.

Such hymns were chanted, not sung, and performed by a *single* voice. Across the centuries they were maintained for liturgy and ritual, and developed for new or revived sects, such as the followers of Orpheus, especially in Boeotia (Pausanias 9.30.12) and Asia Minor (*Orphica*).

Lyric hymns, sung, as the name suggests, to the lyre by solo or chorus, are also familiar. Our knowledge of the great lyric poets is for the most part fragmentary, but in the surviving scraps of Alcaeus we can trace hymns to Apollo, Hermes and Athene, and even one to Poverty (Penia). Pindar, the greatest of all writers of choral lyric, had his poems classified: they included hymns,

paeans (hymns to Apollo) and dithyrambs (hymns to Dionysus). An interesting example of such a hymn, only marginally parodized, comes in a comic drama of Aristophanes (*Knights* 581 94): the poet through the chorus appeals to the goddess Pallas Athene for victory.

> Pallas, our city's protector,
> Rule of a land of piety,
> A land outstanding
> Among all lands in war,
> And poetry, and power,
> Come here, attended
> By our true companion
> In war and battle,
> Victory, our friend in the theatre,
> Our ally against our enemies.
> Be seen here now.
> We need all your skill
> To bring your servants
> Victory, if ever, now.

The music was composed always by the writer of the words: words and music fell into place together. We would give a lot to possess the strains of a Pindaric ode, and also to see how Aristophanes turns such music to effect in comedy.

Surviving texts of hymns from a later period show three other important uses of hymnody. The Isis-aretalogies are in their way unique. The catalogues of her qualities and achievements are put into the mouth of the goddess herself, and take on the force of a divine revelation. Secondly, some of the later philosophical schools, notably the Stoics and Neoplatonists, used hymns which are certainly in a sense products of personal religion, while at the same time involving a profound intellectual content. One verse by the Stoic Cleanthes has not failed to attract comparison to a Christian hymn.

> Lead me, o Zeus, and Thou, o Destiny,
> Lead Thou me on.
> In whatsoever paths Thou wouldst for me
> Lead Thou me on.
> I follow fearless, or if in mistrust
> I lag and will not, follow still I must.

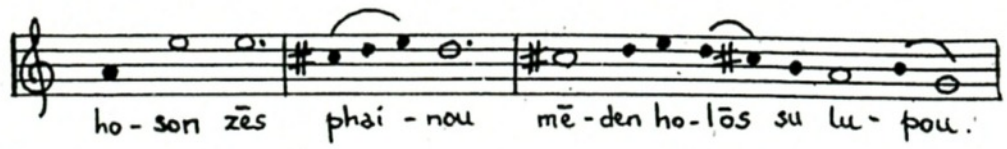
The determinism of the final couplet comes as something of a shock. Of another, longer, *Hymn to Zeus* it has been said that its theme is

> How sweet the name of Logos sounds
> In a believer's ear.

Thirdly, in the darker realm where religion and magic intertwine inextricably, and spells to bind and compel the deity are side by side with prayers to persuade him, the hymn-form was widely used for those prayers.

It is hard to achieve any real sensation of what the hymns may have been like in performance. We know that the singing, when choral, was in unison. The theoreticians of the Greek world who tell us about ancient music are almost incomprehensible, though R. P. Winnington-Ingram and others have

done their best to enlighten our understandings. The Greeks spoke of different modes, to which they ascribe tribal titles. We shall not go far wrong, and it will give us some framework of reference from which to start, if we treat the modes as the scales produced by playing the white keys of the piano from different starting-points. The Greeks associated the different modes with different responses from the hearer, rather as we find the minor key more plaintive than the major. Thus they regarded the Dorian mode (E–E: the mediaeval Dorian was D–D) as masculine, majestic, sombre and powerful; the Mixolydian (B–B) as emotional. We have no transcriptions of music from the classical period, but from the Hellenistic Age we have some transcriptions, using letters for musical notation, of paeans to Apollo at Delphi. Here is a short excerpt in modem notation of a passage which in fact comes from an epitaph.



It should be explained that though we can be certain of the relative position of the notes to one another we have no indication of the correct pitch. The Christian writer Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus* 2.4) has a brilliant passage attacking the excesses of pagan music, and is especially critical of the instrumental use of pipe, flute, cymbals and drums, and of melodies with chromatic intervals. But austere *harmoniai* (whatever they may be: possibly just the modes: the metaphor is from joinery) are permissible.

Hellenistic Judaism was the cradle of Christianity. Christians should not forget either that we are the offspring of Judaism, or that the Judaism of the first century had been moulded by a Greek environment for three centuries. The traditional Temple ceremonial involved the blowing of trumpets and the singing of lyrics to a string accompaniment. So in Psalm 98.5–6:

> *Sing psalms in the Lord's honour with the harp,*
> *With the harp and with the music of the psaltery.*
> *With trumpet and ringing horn*
> *Make a joyful noise before the Lord our King.*

Or in Amos 5.23:

> *Spare me the sound of your songs:*
> *I cannot stand the music of your lutes.*

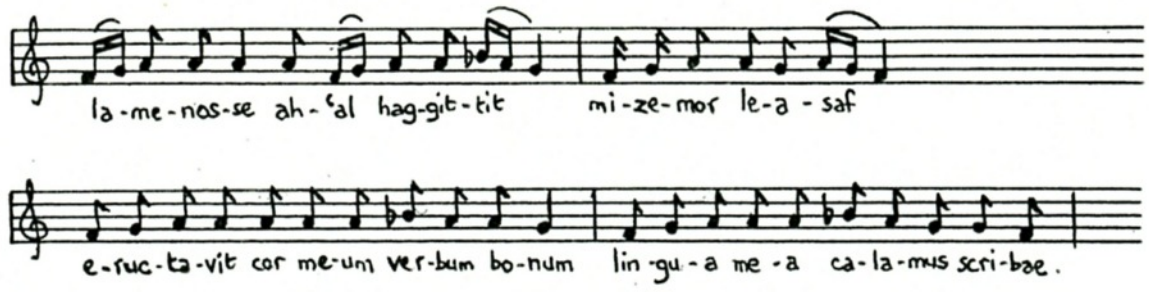
There were five main classes of these songs: hymns or praise-songs for Yahweh, which include the so-called enthronement psalms; communal laments for fast days; royal psalms for the king; individual laments; individual acts of thanksgiving. The categories are, however, not sharply defined. In addition to these there is an important group of pilgrim-songs which were used processionally. The texts sometimes break off with the word *Selah* before resuming. This probably, though the matter is still controversial, means an instrumental interlude. Occasionally the choir is divided. Thus in Psalm 24.9-10 we have

> CHOIR A: Lift up your heads, o gates,
> Lift them up, everlasting doors,
> And the King of Glory will come in.

CHOIR B: Who is this King of Glory?
CHOIR A: The Lord of Hosts,
He is the King of Glory.

Psalm 136 is similarly antiphonal.

We know little about the music, but may possibly have an indication from the music of Psalm 81.1 in Hebrew as sung in the tenth century AD, which was also used for Psalm 44.1–2 in Latin. The music must go back far before the tenth century, but we cannot be certain how far.



Another fact to register is that the orthodox felt the introduction of Greek music to be alien: this must mean that it happened. We may suspect that the music to The Song of the Three Children ('Praise him and magnify him for ever') and The Prayer of Manasseh had Greek-style music. The old tunes would not in fact fit the Greek translations of the Septuagint. *The Psalms of Solomon* (first century BC) and *The Psalms of the Dead Sea Sect* (first century AD) similarly call for Greek music. Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus* 2.4) compares the chanting of the psalms in the synagogues of the Dispersion at his own period (about AD 200) with Greek drinking-songs.

The Book of Psalms, the hymn-book of the Jews, was naturally the first hymn-book of the Christian community. Jesus in the gospels is recorded as quoting 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings' (Ps. 8.2; Matthew 21.16), 'They hated me without reason' (35.19; 69.4; John 15.25), 'I said, You are gods' (82.6; John 10.34), 'The Lord said to my Lord' (110.1; Mark 12.36–7) and 'The stone that the builders rejected' (118.22–3; Mark 12.10). The picture of the Good Shepherd in John 10.1 recalls Psalm 23 and 95.7 ('We are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand'). Above all, in the agony of the cross the mind turns to the psalms, and the cry of desolation 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? is a quotation of Psalm 22.1. The evangelists refer to other verses from the same psalm: 'My strength is dried up' (22.15), 'They gaze and look at me' (22.17), 'They cast lots for my clothes' (22.18). But the 22nd psalm ends not in desolation but in hope, 'I shall live for his sake (22.29–30), and the cry of desolation is also a pointer to an ultimate faith and hope. Jesus, as we should expect, had the psalms by heart, though he does not quote them as frequently as we might have thought, and his use of them is highly selective: he does not allude to songs of hatred such as the 68th, or the end of the 137th, where the singer takes delight in the thought of bashing out the brains of Babylonian babies.

The first Christians were Jews, regularly in worship at Temple or synagogue, and continuing in use of the psalms as their hymn-book. But they began to give these an interpretation of their own. This can be seen most clearly in the first chapters of Hebrews, where the author applies to Jesus passages from the Psalms as proof of his divinity: 1.5: Ps. 2.7; 1.8: Ps. 45, 6–7; 1.10: Ps. 102.25–7; 1.13: Ps. 110.1; 2.68: Ps. 8.4–6 (the writer adds 'We do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus.'). Later he also uses other passages: 5.6: Ps. 110.4; 10.5–7: Ps. 40.6–8 (the author stresses that Christ is the true sacrifice). Similarly in Romans 15 Paul gives to Psalm 18.49 'Therefore I will

praise you among the Gentiles' and 117.1 'Praise the Lord, all Gentiles' a Messianic interpretation in the context of Christ.

The psalter, then, was the Church's first hymn-book, taken over from Jewish worship into Christian worship, from about AD 50, presumably first in Antioch. The text used was the Septuagint, and the headings there (which do not date from the original translation, are not identical with the headings in Hebrew, and are repudiated by Judaism) may refer to its use in Christian worship. So the church historian Socrates (*HE* 6.8) says that Ignatius introduced antiphonal singing of psalms following the practice of the Church in Antioch. Tertullian (*Apology* 31.3) declares that psalms were taken over from the synagogue by the Church and used all over the world. In the fourth century Egeria (if that was her name) in the record of her pilgrimage describes the Sunday vigil service at Jerusalem. It consists of alternating praise (psalms) and prayer, followed by a central prayer, the reading of Scripture, more psalms and prayer, and a final blessing. This is not far off the pattern of worship found in the synagogues.

As the liturgies emerge we find the increasing use of versicles and responses from the Psalms. For example, the Syrian liturgy uses 'O taste and see' (Ps. 34.8). The Galliean liturgy uses the same verse, and from the same psalm 'I will bless the Lord at all times' (Ps. 34.1) and 'The Lord redeems his servants' life' (Ps. 34.22). After each verse come three Hallelujahs, which Germanus terms the *trecanum*, symbolizing the Trinity. Various liturgies use Ps. 118.25–7 'Save us we beseech you', 'Blessed be he who enters in the Lord's name', and 'The Lord is God and has given us light'. John Chrysostom (345–407) actually says that David (i.e. the psalter) comes first, middle and last in vigils, early mornings, funerals, monasteries, convents and deserts. The popularity of these songs led to abuse; worshippers were enjoying the singing rather than concentrating on the meaning. The fourth-century Canons of Laodicea (their exact date is uncertain) ruled that psalms should not be read consecutively, but interspersed with Scripture. In fact under these and other constraints from above the psalms were increasingly spoken rather than sung. In some Egyptian monasteries 50 to 60 were recited in a single day; more usually the whole psalter was read in a single monastic week. Candidates for ordination were expected to know the whole psalter by heart.

There are other songs in the Hebrew scriptures beside the Book of Psalms, such as the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. Some of these were included among the nine odes officially incorporated in the Byzantine liturgy in the early sixth century, but surely in use considerably earlier. The nine were: the Song of Moses after the Red Sea, 'I will sing to the Lord' (Exodus 15.1–19); the Song of Moses before death, 'Give ear to what I say' (Deuteronomy 32.1–43); the Prayer of Hannah, 'My heart rejoices' (1 Samuel 2.1–10); the Prayer of Habakkuk, 'O Lord, I have heard' (Habakkuk 3.2–19); an extract from Isaiah, starting in the middle of a song, 'With all my heart I long for thee in the night' (Isaiah 26.9–19); Jonah's prayer from the fish's belly, 'I called to the Lord in my distress' (Jonah 2.2–9); the Song of Azariah, 'Blessed art thou, o Lord', coupled with the opening of the Song of the Three, Blessed art thou' (Daniel 3.26–45, 52–6); the Song of the Three, 'Let the whole creation' (Daniel 3.57–90); Magnificat and Benedictus (Luke 1.46–55,68–79). The Codex Alexandrinus of the early fifth century contains these canticles together with four others: the Prayer of Hezekiah after recovery, 'I thought in the prime of my life I must pass away' (Isaiah 38.10–20; the Prayer of Manasseh from the Apocrypha; Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2.29–32); the morning hymn 'Glory to God in the Highest'. The inclusion there suggests an already long-established liturgical usage, but we cannot be certain how, when or where they first came to be sung.

However, the New Testament itself incorporates quotations of or from or allusions to a number of very early Christian hymns. Benedictus (Luke 1.68–79) has reasonably but not assuredly been supposed to be a borrowing from one of the sects that grew up around John the Baptist. Magnificat

(Luke 1.46–55) and Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2.29–32) are, on the face of it, translated from the Aramaic. The Book of Revelation is full of hymns, or adaptations of hymns: the saints in heaven and the saints on earth are joined in a common paean of praise. Such are 5.9–10; 15.3–4; 19.1; 19.6–7; 22.17. The First Letter to Timothy has two passages which look like hymns. The first is at 3.16:

Manifest in flesh,
Justified in the Spirit,
Seen of angels.
Preached to the Gentiles,
Believed in the world,
Received up to glory.

Those are oriental rhythms requiring oriental music. The other passage is 6.15–16:

The blessed and only sovereign.
King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
Who alone has immortality.
Who lives in unapproachable light,
Whom no one has seen or can see,
To him be honour and eternal dominion.
Amen.

The Second Letter to Timothy also contains a hymnic passage (2.11–13):

If we died with him, we shall live with him.
If we deny him, he will deny us.
If we are faithless, he is faithful.
He cannot deny himself.

From Ephesians (5.14) we glean ‘Awake, sleeper; rise from the dead and Christ shall give you light’. The most interesting and extensive of all these early hymns has been identified by E. Lohmeyer in Philippians 2.6–11. Some scholars demur, but this is surely correct. There are two interesting features of this magnificent passage. First, it does not belong to the Hebraic pattern of hymn-writing; it calls for Greek music. Second, its theology, is closely parallel to the theology of the prologue to John’s gospel. That gospel is usually attributed to Ephesus, and Ephesus is one, perhaps the most probable, source of the Captivity Epistles. Further, the Logos-theology has affinities with Alexandrian Jewish thought, and Apollos came from Alexandria and preached at Ephesus. It is likely that in Philippians 2 we have an indication of the faith of the Church of Ephesus, formulated under Alexandrian influence, before the arrival of Paul. It is less likely that the prologue to John is itself a hymn; Kingsley Barrett stands rightly against that view. Philippians 2.6–11 is the hymn.

There are a few other very early indications. A passage from Ignatius *Letter to Ephesians* (7.2) sounds like a hymn:

One is the Physician,
Both flesh and spirit,
Born yet not born,
God is man.
True life in death,
Both of Mary and of God,

First passible then impassible,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

That again is oriental in shape, yet it is not unlike a paean to Asclepius, and it is impossible to be certain about the nature of the music. C. C. Torrey argued that the Lord's Prayer in its Lucan form reflects a metrical Aramaic original and was perhaps sung, and we are sufficiently used to chanting the Lord's Prayer not to jib at the possibility. There are other familiar phrases that may well have been sung or chanted. One such is 'Hallelujah!' A Rabbi friend suggests that the Jewish chant for Hallelujah is very old and might well go back to the pre-Christian era: if so it is almost certainly the one which the Christians first used. Other phrases that were possibly chanted are 'Holy, holy, holy' (Revelation 4.8), 'Maranatha' (1 Corinthians 16.22), 'Hosanna to the Son of David' (*Didache* 10.6).

As we have said, the first Christians attended the Temple and synagogue and joined in the singing there. The accounts of the early house-meetings in the Acts of the Apostles speak only of prayer. But there are plenty of references to singing in the record of the New Testament Church. In Acts 16.25 Paul and Silas, in jail in Philippi, at their prayers sing praises to God. In writing to the Christians in Corinth Paul says 'I will sing hymns as I am inspired to sing, but I will also sing intelligently' and again 'When you meet for worship each of you contributes a hymn, instruction, revelation, ecstatic utterance or its interpretation' (1 Corinthians 14.15, 26); the latter passage sounds very Quakerly, at least as in Bourneville meeting where hymn-books are available. To Colossae he writes 'Sing thankfully in your hearts to God with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs' (Colossians 3.16); the context there is baptism, and there is explicit reference to sung texts other than psalms. In Ephesians 5.19 he writes 'Speak to one another in psalms, hymns and songs: sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord'; there the context is the Eucharist. The last two passages make clear that music was from a very early stage associated with the most precious sacramental services. The sober James enjoins (5.13) 'Is any of you in good spirits? He should sing praises'. In the Book of Revelation, where the scene in heaven reflects the scene on earth, the elders hold musical instruments and sing (5.8–9); it would be interesting to make it a condition of holding the office of elder today. One early outside reference provides important corroborative evidence. Pliny the Younger, reporting to the Emperor on the Christians in Bithynia, says 'They used to gather *before dawn* on a *fixed day* and utter *responsively* a *song* to *Christ* as to *a god*', gathering again in the evening for a common meal. Sunday then was the Christians' holy day: it was a normal working-day (the Romans did not have our 'weekend'), so that they had to meet before and after the day's work. Their worship centred on Christ and included an antiphonal hymn to him. One other, somewhat later, piece of evidence from Clement of Alexandria from the seventh *Miscellany* runs 'We praise God as we farm and sing hymns as we sail'. This may mean that hymns were used as a kind of work-song.

All this enables us to identify five characteristics of early Christian hymnody:

(a) It was not long before singing became a part of corporate worship.
(b) The songs were a vital part of individual devotion.
(c) The repertoire early extended beyond the psalms.
(d) Antiphonal or responsive singing appeared early.
(e) Christian hymns might be directed to God about Christ, or addressed to Christ.

Of the developments in the first three centuries we are best acquainted, by some quirk of history, with the Gnostic hymns. It may be that these were the most important developments but we cannot be certain of that. We have *The Odes of Solomon*. They date from the first and second centuries, but there is much uncertainty about them. Are they Christian originals, Christian adaptations of Jewish originals, or Gnostic? In them Jesus is identified with Wisdom, and much is made of the Descent

into She'ol. They have little idea of the Church or of the Holy Spirit. We also have a number of quotations from the Manichean psalter. The most attractive of all the Gnostic hymns is 'The Hymn of the Pearl'. It begins:

When I was a small child
Living in my Father's royal palace,
Delighting in the rich luxury
Of those who brought me up.
My parents sent me out with provisions
Away from our homeland in the East.

They take of his fine clothes and send him to Egypt to fetch the pearl, which is guarded by a snake. He puts on the Egyptians' clothes: these drug him into forgetfulness of his past and his mission. His father sends him a letter. He recovers himself, charms the snake, secures the pearl, and is sent his robe.

Suddenly, as I looked at it,
I seemed to be seeing myself in a mirror.
I saw it complete in myself.
I saw myself complete in it.
We were divided into two,
But one in form.

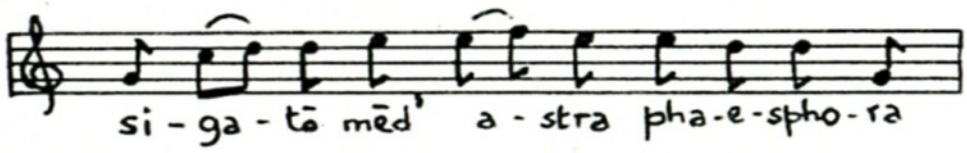
We can make an attempt at reading the allegory. The King's son is the Saviour, the pearl is the soul, Egypt is the world of matter, the Egyptian clothes are the body, the robe is the true self. But there is already some blurring apparent, for in some sense we are the King's son, and the letter is the Saviour. Somehow the prince and the pearl seem to overlap.

When the Council of Laodicea banned private psalms from public worship, allowing only the 150 of the psalter, it was no doubt to stop the spread of heretical ideas through popular songs.

Among the earliest Christian hymns are the morning hymns already mentioned 'Glory to God in the Highest' and the evening hymn *phōs hilaron* ('Joyous light of glorious day' or 'Hail, gladdening light' or 'O gladsome light'). Clement of Alexandria cites a hymn to Christ the Good Shepherd:

Bit for untamed colts,
Wing for sure-coursed birds,
Sure helm for ships,
Shepherd of the royal flocks,
Gather your children
All together
To praise in holiness.
To hymn without guile.
Christ, his children's guide.

One fragment of third-century church music survives:



In the west Hilary of Poitiers (315–67) is called by Isidore the first Latin hymn-writer. He tells us of four techniques of hymn-singing or psalm-singing:

canticus:	unaccompanied
psalmus:	instrumental playing
canticus psalmi:	antiphony led by an instrument
psalmus cantici:	antiphony led by singers

Eight of his hymns survive, and include the germs of rhyme. Ambrose too talks of antiphonal singing. Perhaps 12 of the 92 attributed to him are authentic. It was he who introduced the office hymn, to be sung at a fixed point of the liturgy. Here is a translation of the opening lines from Deus *creator omnium*:

Creator of the earth and sky,
Ruling the firmament on high,
Clothing the day with robes of light,
Blessing with gracious sleep the night.

Ambrose, great man that he was, made two of the classic statements in justification of hymn-singing. 'The man who utters a hymn of praise is uttering spiritually and with a pure heart' (in Ps. 44.9), and The singing of praise is the very bond of unity' (in Ps. 1 Enarr. 9). Grimm called Ambrose 'the father of Church song'. For us his descendants he marks the beginning of hymns as we know them.

[Sadly, this article is a posthumous publication since our member John Ferguson died on 22 May, aged 68. He was a distinguished classical scholar who, after professorships at the Universities of Ibadan and Minnesota, was Director of Studies in Arts at the Open University 1969-79, and President of the Selly Oak Colleges 1979–86. He was also much involved with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the United Nations Association and the British Council of Churches. His vast literary output included *Hymns of a Layman*, 1982: one of his hymns, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' has found wider circulation in several hymnals and supplements both in Britain and abroad.]