

Life of the Spirit

Volume VI

JUNE 1952

Number 72

THE CHURCH'S EARLIEST HYMNS

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THE Hebrew Psalter became and has been for centuries the great hymn-book of the Church. The wonder of this book of 'Praises' has, very rightly, been made manifest through its long history. Very closely akin are the Canticles in St Luke's Gospel. These represent a genre of their own: we might say, New Testament ideas in Old Testament dress. Thus the *Magnificat* of our Lady is modelled on the Cantic of Anna (1 Sam. 2, 1-10) and recalls the Song of Miriam (Exod. 15, 1-21), the *Benedictus* echoes the language of psalms and prophecies, and the *Nunc Dimittis* is redolent of passages in Isaiah.

Alongside the more hebraic traditions of prayer and praise we can discern the beginnings of more specifically Christian, and indeed Christological, hymns. These would date from very early days in the life of the Church, when the New Israel of God had drawn away from the Synagogue and when a St Peter would no more go into the Temple 'for the prayer of the ninth hour' (Acts 3, 1). Interesting external evidence of Christian hymn-singing is to be found in the well-known letter of Pliny the younger to the Emperor Trajan on how to deal with Christian subjects. He finds them a nuisance rather than criminal. They have a curious habit of meeting at an early hour and 'singing a hymn to Christ, as to a God', and that, apparently, in alternate strophes.¹ This external evidence however is relatively late when we consider the evidence of St Paul's epistles and other New Testament texts. Admittedly a great part of the New Testament would have to be quarried were we to treat primitive Christian hymns at all adequately; thus the hymns of the Apocalypse alone would furnish matter for an ample study. With this proviso, let us examine certain more particularly Christ-centred or Christological texts.

1. 'carmenque Christo quasi Deo dicere secum invicem' (Ep. x, 96 (97)).

Awake, thou that sleepest
 And arise from the dead,
 And Christ shall enlighten thee (Ephesians 5, 14),

has very generally been recognised as a fragment of a Christian hymn. The context is that of a general exhortation to purity: 'have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness', but rather be 'ransoming the time because the days are evil'. The verses are introduced by 'wherefore it is said' (v. 14). Some have taken this to mean 'the Scripture says'; but, as St Jerome complains, 'To be sure, I have, in my poor way, scoured all the editions of the ancient scriptures, painstakingly gone through the tomes of the Hebrews, and never have I found this "scripture".' So others suggested that the verses were from some apocryphal text. Or again it might be said, 'as the prophets of old speaking to the people would say, *Thus saith the Lord . . . or Because the Lord has said it . . . so now the apostle full of the Holy Ghost suddenly blurts out the very thoughts which our Lord pondered in himself*' (S. Jerome *In Epist. ad Ephes.* P.L. 36, 525).

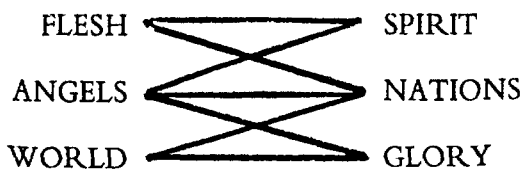
Most moderns, however, agree that these verses are a citation from a primitive Christian hymn, and in particular a baptismal hymn. The equation of baptism with '*photismos*' (as in St Justin and subsequent tradition) follows very naturally on the themes of the 'light' in St John, or forceful texts about 'those who have once been enlightened, have tasted the heavenly gift, have become partakers in the Holy Spirit and have tasted the glorious Word of God' (Heb. 6, 4). The verbal background of the text is almost certainly a very clear reminiscence, almost a loose quotation of Isaiah 60, 1, 'Arise, be enlightened O Jerusalem; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee'. However specifically Christian the hymn fragments may be, they are never wholly estranged from the legacy of Israel.

A capital section of 1 Timothy, standing on its own, briefly sums up two fundamental notions, of which the entire epistle is but a commentary or practical application. This key section is in 1 Timothy 3, 15-16. The two fundamental parts are (v. 15), (a) the Church whose nature is to be 'house of God', whose mission or function is to be 'the pillar and stay of the truth'; (b) v. 16, the Church's message or 'mystery of piety', viz. Jesus Christ, incarnate and glorified.

Who was manifested in flesh
 Justified in spirit
 seen by angels;
 was preached among the nations
 believed on in the world
 taken up in glory.

This little poem is introduced by 'great is the mystery of piety', which inevitably brings to mind the great pagan cry 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' (Acts. 19, 28, 34). This has the more point if we remember that 1 Timothy was written from Ephesus, and that its general theme or purpose is to exalt the God of Christians and Christ the Lord above the Ephesian divinity. It seems reasonable, too, to suppose that Christian hymn-writers would from very early times have opposed their chant and hymns to that of the votaries of the great Artemis. Under the emperors many cities (e.g. Smyrna, Nicopolis, Pergamum) had hymn-writers and cantors attached to their sanctuaries, particularly with reference to the emperor-cult. Ephesus was no exception.

Looking at the text more closely, lovers of Greek will at once notice the remarkable series of assonances produced by six verbs in the characteristic aorist passive form. This is a semitic trait, and can be paralleled in the structure of the *Our Father* (Matt. 6, 9), or the prayers in Isaiah 37, 17, or Eccus. 36. All readers can appreciate the double 'chiasmus',² which becomes obvious when set out thus:



Mere word-play, it might be said, but it does help very much in enabling us to gauge the different texture of these verses, and how they stand out of their immediate context and in the whole epistle.

As regards the content or doctrine of these verses, the order is that of the primitive oral catechisms sc. the pre-existence of our Lord, his coming on earth, his message of salvation, his resurrection and ascension . . . in other words, the theme manifest in

2. I owe this to a former pupil, Fr L. Boyle, O.P.

speeches of the Acts, the 'chronological' order of the Incarnation, the rhythm, so to speak, of God's mind. This order is most fully perceptible³ in a famous text—Philippians 2, 6-11—which has come to be termed the Hymn to Christ Servant of God.⁴

I. He who, though he was 'by nature' God,
yet set not great store on his equality with God;
rather he emptied himself,
taking the 'nature' of a slave.

II. Becoming like unto men
and in outward guise appearing as a man,
he humbled himself,
becoming obedient unto death,
death upon a cross.

III. That is why God has raised him up
and has graced him with the name above every name,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend, in heaven, on earth, under the earth;
and every tongue confess: Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The division into strophes might be debated: that in these verses we have more than rhythmic prose seems to be certainly established. St Paul has been exhorting the Philippians to charity, harmony, humility, to have Christ as their model, 'let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus' (2, 5).

The thought of the poem owes much to the notion of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. The Servant of Isaiah and the Son of Man of Daniel are the two great prophetic types of our Lord, a capital note in the theology, liturgy and life of the primitive Church. 'Despised and most abject of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with infirmity . . . he was bruised for our sins . . . hath delivered his soul unto death, was reputed with the wicked; and he hath borne the sins of many, and hath prayed for the transgressors' (Isaiah 53, 3, 5, 12). But in addition to this—and the contrast is striking enough to have been at the origin of our text of

3. It appears partially in traces of a similar hymn in Heb. 1, 3, and 1 Peter 2, 22-4.

4. Thus treated by L. Cerfaux in *Le Christ dans la Théologie de Saint Paul*, pp. 283-298. (*Lectio Divina* 6.)

Philippians—we read: ‘. . . if he shall lay down his life for sin, he shall see a long-lived seed, and the will of the Lord shall be prosperous by his hand’ (Isaiah 53, 10). ‘Behold, my servant shall understand, he shall be exalted and extolled, and shall be exceedingly high’ (Isaiah 52, 13). We must add too: ‘Be converted to me and you shall be saved, all ye ends of the earth: for I am God and there is no other . . . for every knee shall be bowed to me, and every tongue shall swear. . . .’ (Isaiah 45, 22, 24).

Further study would show even better how much these New Testament texts owe to the Old Testament in general and Isaiah in particular.

The text of Philippians which we have considered treats of the Saviour in himself, pre-existent and then Redeemer. In the opening prologue of Colossians (I, 1-23), where St Paul embarks upon the refutation of the Colossian heresy, it is possible to discern a section on our Lord's Person and work. This section (vv. 15-20) can be detached from its context without troubling the rhythmic flow and unity of the whole passage, and is a compact piece of Christology, more particularly concerned with what the Lord Jesus has *effected*, whether in his pre-existence or as Redeemer and head of the Church. This little section can be rendered as follows, and set out in two strophes, thus:

I. It is he who is image of the unseen God,
 first-born before every creature,
 so that in him was created all,
 in heaven as on earth,
 the seen and the unseen;
 Thrones, Lordships, Principalities, Powers,
 —all was created through him and for him
 and he himself is prior to all: all coheres in him.
 He again is Head of the body, the Church.

II. It is he who is Principle,
 First-born from the dead,
 so that among all he may stand first,
 and thus [God] pleased that all Fullness dwell in him,
 and through him to reconcile all to himself
 things of earth as things of heaven, through him
 who brings peace by the blood of his cross.
 We thus, without doing violence to text and context, seem to dis-

cern a little Christological poem or hymn. The first strophe tells of Christ in his pre-existence as Creator because Perfect Image of the unseen God, and has an absolute primacy in creation as in the re-creation which is Redemption. 'Head of the body, the Church' forms a transition to the second strophe which dwells more in his primacy in the effecting of Redemption and in the effectiveness of the Church as Christ continued. The 'Fullness' (*Pleroma*) that dwells in him is the power of sanctification of the divinity which is linked to the body of the Risen Christ.

Besides Christological themes, we have in 2 Timothy 2, 11-13, what is almost certainly a hymn fragment on a theme of enduring faith:

Faithful is the saying:

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him:

if we endure, we shall also reign with him:

if we deny him, he also will deny us:

if we are faithless, he remains faithful:

for he cannot deny himself.

The introductory clause 'faithful is the saying' suggests apostolic preaching which echoes that of our Lord himself. The hymn itself stands out because of the four pairs of balanced antithetical clauses. The last line, it has been suggested, is an addition of St Paul himself; though this need not be so, especially as so little can be said about the metre and structure of these very early hymns. As regards content: these verses are an encouragement to trust and faithfulness in the stress of trial and persecution. 'If we have died with him' refers to 'death with Christ' at baptism (cf. Rom. 6, 2-5 & 8). There is a clear reminiscence of our Lord's words, 'he that shall deny me before men, I will also deny him before my father who is in heaven' (Matt. 10, 33). The implied imagery behind the words is that rather of a soldier in the act of struggling and enduring 'unto death'—not St Paul's usual imagery of the athlete or labourer, or the (stationary) warrior donning the armour of God (Ephes. 6, 11).

With this we may conclude. The examination is here only introductory to the earliest hymns of the Church—the Church which to the end of time will sing to God 'in psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles' (Ephes. 5, 19). It may lead to an understanding of the nature of those early songs, as well as to the meaning of these passages in St Paul.