
Forum given by W. Patrick Edwards

The Hymn of Christ, or Carmen Christi, enthroned as “the centerpiece” of Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Church in Philippi, represents one of the earliest, if not the earliest expression, complex and extensive Christologies in existence. Its expression of the shared nature of Christ with God the Father, combined with His assumption of human form, his death, and his glorification by the Father, is an elegant articulation of many of the credal beliefs Christians still embrace today.

However, its origins are uncertain, given its apparent inconsistency in style, grammar, and vocabulary from the rest of the epistle and other writings from within the Pauline corpus. Further, the existence and use of similar hymns in early church liturgy throughout Christendom during the same period and before, along with evidence in its form and content suggesting possible Aramaic origins from within a Hellenized Jewish-Christian community, raise questions and possible alternative origins for the authorship of the hymn other than Saint Paul, and further suggest its preexistence to his Letter to the Philippians.

Ultimately it is impossible to conclusively determine the origins and author of the Carmen Christi, but there is adequate evidence to suggest several possible alternatives that present the hymn as having a very early existence, prior to the composition of the remainder of the Epistle of the Philippians, and likely from a pen other than Saint Paul.

Some of the earliest scholarship done on the question of the origins of the Christ Hymn was performed by Ernst Lohmeyer, onetime Professor of New Testament at the University of Breslau, heroic ant-nazi, and victim of Soviet repression in 1946. His examination was the “first to put forward the argument that the verses [Philippians 2: 6 - 11] must be pre-Pauline, and, therefore incorporated by Paul

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into his letter.”\(^2\) According to Martin’s compilation, the arguments against Pauline authorship put forward by Lohmeyer and his successors are arranged in four categories: form of the verses, language test, the hymn’s similarity with the Servant of Yahweh teaching in Isaiah, and Paul’s debt to his predecessors in the formation of Christian liturgy and hymnody.

On the matter of the form of the verses, Lohmeyer’s arguments are based on “underlying Semitic origins.” He argues that the form of the verses suggested a Semitic style using features common to Semitic hymnic prayer-speech, rendering a ballad-like tone that was “possible only in Semitic writings.”\(^3\) His conclusion, therefore, is that the author of the hymn was a native speaker of a Semitic language, though composing in Greek.

The preceding argument does not effectively exclude Paul from being the author, but in examining the arguments relating to the Greek word used in the composition, the evidence indicates there are a number of uncommon words that are, in this passage, unique in the Pauline corpus or otherwise used only on one other occasion. Also, there are theological concepts raised in the hymn are also peculiar from any other such views expressed elsewhere by Saint Paul. These concepts include a Christology of equality with God, but also excludes some elements that he usually stresses, including the redemptive power of the cross.

Expanding on Lohmeyer’s evidence, Martin examines the scholarship of Eduard Schweizer, who categorized the instances of the discrepancies in language and content between the hymn and Saint Paul’s customary expression.

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\(^2\) Lohmeyer, Ernst _Kyrios Jesus_ quoted in Martin, Ralph P. _A Hymn for Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Church Worship_ (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove Ill.: 1997).

\(^3\) Martin, Ralph P. _A Hymn for Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Church Worship_ (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove Ill.: 1997) 46.
From the perspective of the argument concerning the Servant of Yahweh teaching put forward by Lohmeyer and supported by Vincent Taylor and others, there exists a corollary between the hymn and the Old Testament’s “servant doctrine” in Isaiah 53 and elsewhere. This teaching is evident in passages from the Book of Acts and I Peter, and would therefore indicate a pre-Pauline doctrine from within the early church. Also, the language is evident in Saint Paul’s teachings within the Philippians’ hymn, and not found elsewhere within other Pauline writings except referring to older Christian teachings.

Finally, Martin makes a compelling argument regarding Paul’s debt to his predecessors by employing Paul’s own words to illustrate his exposure to the influences, words, and ideas of others who might have formed, shaped, and informed his theology and doctrine. This argument, however, fails to take into account his own repeated and vehemently asserted beliefs that his revelations are note from humans, but from God, alone. Despite the baptism, society, and instruction he might have received from his fellow Christians, Saint Paul feels that his understanding of the Gospel is received from Jesus Christ, so these assertions are not supported by Saint Paul, despite his affirmations concerning his formation as a Christian.

Providing counterpoint to the arguments opposing Pauline authorship of the hymn, primarily through the pen of Lucien Cerfau. He relies on arguments that, given it is concerning the Lord, and that it is obviously poetry, it is expected that Paul would use a heightened sort of language in expressing this Christology, and that the exclusivity of the language would not indicate an external author.

Others, such as David Black, stress the ambiguity of the issue and demand that Pauline authorship be given the benefit of the doubt. “It is my judgement that the arguments against Pauline authorship are insufficient to prove that the hymn is pre-Pauline.”

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However, Black’s acceptance of Paul, despite using Literary-Critical Analysis, uses the same degree of uncertainty as does the anti-Pauline critics, and fails to form a conclusive argument. Indeed, other authors such as Mark Wegener\(^5\) dwell more on the uses Paul makes of the material, and largely discount its origins. Sharing this conclusion is Marchal, who sidestep its origins.\(^6\)

If Paul is not the author, then the exact origins are open to conjecture, though there is some compelling scholarship to conclude that the author, or at least the point of origin, might have been a community, or person or persons within such a community, of Hellenized Jews. This theory is predicated on the evidence within the language used in the hymn seeming to emulate patterns that would be consistent with the author or final redactor being someone who’s mother tongue was Aramaic, but who was comfortable also with the Greek language.

The Jesuit scholar Joseph Fitzmeyer performs a careful retroversion of the Greek text of the hymn to Aramaic, correcting numerous attempts made by previous scholars, and utilizing several interesting techniques that take into account such facets as verb usage in the Greek translations of words in the Septuagint to supports the word used in his conclusions\(^7\). This method includes some intriguing nuances, since the Septuagint text would have been the scripture of such a community\(^8\), and therefore a likely prototype for its own oral and written traditions, sacred declarations, and credal statements, for the community or person composing it. Such a prototype might suggest terms and forms, such as the Isaiah passages in chapter 53 that Black has linked this hymn’s structure.\(^9\)

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\(^5\) Wegener, Mark I. “Philippians 2:6-11 - Paul’s (Revised) Hymn to Jesus” *Sources: Currents in Theology and Mission* 25 n 6 D 1998, 507-517.


\(^9\) Black, 274.
Other scholars even suggest an origin within the Gnostic church, and that its inclusion in Philippians is a later addition\textsuperscript{10}, but these same scholars concede the possibility is unlikely given the centrality of the hymn to the letter, and the relatively undisputed authorship of the letter by the Saint Paul.

Also, there is considerable evidence to link such Christ Hymns to the early church. Gonzalez describes these early hymns as being a central component to early Christian liturgy, and attributes a credal role to the hymns in the services.

Therefore, given the broad support within the scholarship for a pre-Pauline authorship of the hymn, form analysis’ evidence that supports its being a liturgical credal hymn, and the language analysis that gives strong support to an Aramaic origin to the text that was very nearly transliterated into Greek, and finally the evidence of these hymns having their origins in the earliest worship within the Church, all give very strong support to a Jewish-Christian origins predating Saint Paul.

The implications of this providence for the Carmina Christi is important given its strong and well developed christology. This would indicate that the origins of many of the most ambitious elements of our doctrines concerning the incarnation were being pronounced, perhaps in the form of a credal hymn, within only a few decades of the death and resurrection of Christ at the most.

Despite its omission of a soteriological aspect to Christ’s death, His resurrection, and and his coeternal status with God, these few lines put the lie to any implication that the divinity of Christ, nor his humanity, were the later creations of either Saint Paul or the later Church. The earlier, Palestinian, and Jewish-Christian origins indicate an earlier source, and from one that would find such claims of divinity difficult to fabricate on its own.

Ultimately, the true providence of any part of Philippians is uncertain, and any claims to the contrary would be ultimately conjecture. However, the scholarship mentioned above presents a credible pattern of characteristics that would suggest an origins that provides strong evidence of the most early stages, places, and communities of the Church holding to a complex understanding of the incarnation.
Bibliography


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