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The Hymnic Structure of Colossians 1: 15-20

by Wayne McCown

Fifteen years ago Dr. Ralph Martin contributed to our pages a study of Col. 1: 15-20 under the title "An Early Christian Hymn". We are pleased to see the tribute paid to Dr. Martin's study in this further study of the same passage by Dr. McCown of Western Evangelical Seminary, Portland, Oregon.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE recent publication of Edward Lohse's superb commentary on Colossians in the attractive "Hermeneia" series¹ no doubt has stimulated new interest in the study and exegesis of this great Epistle. At Western Evangelical Seminary it prompted the selection of Colossians (along with Ephesians and Philemon) as the subject for the Advanced Greek Seminar of 1973-74. In the course of our study, an insight on the part of seminarian Sammy L. Schwab led to the development of a new proposal relative to the hymnic structure of Col. 1: 15-20.

It is our desire here to publish this proposal, for consideration and critique. (An adequate rebuttal to other views is not possible in such a brief space, nor can we present also a commentary on the passage at the same time: the literature is too extensive, the interpretations too diverse, the conceptions too great. We shall have to be content with our more humble purpose.)

II. THE STATE OF THE WORK

"The hymnic character of Col. 1: 15-20 has long been recognized and generally acknowledged" (Käsemann, 1949).²

Formal analysis of the passage had its beginnings in the first decade of the twentieth century.³ Scholars such as A. Deissmann and J. Weiss noted the distinctive character of these verses and classified the piece as an example of "solemn confession" and "a kind of dogmatic hymn." E. Norden published the first comprehensive study

¹ E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, "Hermeneia" Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

² E. Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (SBTh 1/40; Naperville, Ill.: Alex R. Allenson, Inc., 1964) 149. First published in *Festschrift Rudolf Bultmann zum 65. Geburtstag überreicht* (Stuttgart, 1949).

³ According to the report of R. P. Martin, "An Early Christian Hymn (Col. 1: 15-20)", *E.Q.* 36 (1964) 195-196.

(*Agnostos Theos*, 1913), with attention to both the form and content of this "undoubtedly old traditional material."

Subsequently (in an influential commentary, published in 1930), the whole section 1: 13-29 was treated by E. Lohmeyer as "the order of a primitive Christian worship service," centering on a hymnic statement concerning Christ in vss 15-20.⁴

E. Käsemann appears to have presented the next significant contribution, largely in critique of Lohmeyer. According to his view, "vv 15-20 contain, apart from the Christian interpolations, the supra-historical and metaphysical drama of the gnostic Redeemer. . ."⁵

Today, there does appear to be general agreement that "the quotation of a hymnic unit begins in v. 15 and extends to v. 20." Moreover, most concur with Lohse's conclusion: "Style and language identify vss. 15-20 as a hymnic section which has been appropriated from the tradition."⁶ However, we are confronted with a number of differing analyses of the hymn itself. The structural proposals sometimes are influenced (or even dictated) by religio-historical considerations like Käsemann's, and sometimes by formal and/or logical requirements as in the case of J. M. Robinson.⁷

Lohse, in his recent commentary, has adopted the structural scheme suggested by Käsemann (however, with considerable modification of the gnosticizing interpretation). In this arrangement, the hymn is divided into two strophes: (1) vss 15-18a, Christ and Creation; (2) vss 18b-20, Christ and Reconciliation. Two phrases are thought to be additions to the original hymn: "of the church" (τῆς ἐκκλησίας, v 18a) and "through the blood of his cross" (διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ v 20). In Lohse's treatment, these phrases assume tremendous theological import: thus the "author of Col" interprets the mythological statements of the hymn in terms of historical reality.⁸

Another recently published commentary, authored by R. P. Martin,⁹ follows a structural analysis of the text suggested by E. Schweizer.¹⁰ Herein, Col. 1: 15-20 is understood as originating in

⁴ E. Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser und an Philemon* (Meyer Comm., 8th ed., 1931). Only slightly revised in the 9th ed. of 1954.

⁵ Käsemann, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

⁶ Lohse, *op. cit.*, p. 41 (both quotations).

⁷ J. M. Robinson, "A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1: 15-20," *JBL* 76 (1957), pp. 270-287. Briefly discussed below.

⁸ Cf. Lohse, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 60.

⁹ R. P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972).

¹⁰ Schweizer, *The Church as the Body of Christ* (Richmond, Va: John Knox, 1964), pp. 64-73; cf. also art., "The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ," *NTS* 8 (1961-62), pp. 1-11.

"a type of Jewish speculation which gave central place to the 'wisdom of God.'" ¹¹ Three stanzas are discerned, covering the aspects of creation (vss 15-16), preservation (vss 17-18a), and redemption (vss 18b-20). Although this treatment is more conservative theologically, in its handling of the text a greater number of additions (by "Paul") are assumed: namely, v 16, "visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or authorities or powers"; v 18a, "the church"; v 18b, "that in everything he might be pre-eminent"; and v 20b, "whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." The original hymn, as reconstructed, comprises three stanzas of three lines each.

Even greater liberties with the text were assumed by J. M. Robinson, in a study centred particularly on the "formal analysis" of this passage. ¹² Not only were the above cited deletions postulated (later assumed by Schweizer and Martin), but several transpositions as well: v 18a was brought to the close of the hymn, followed by v 18c. Thus the hymn ends (following v 20a): "And he himself is the head of the body,/That he might in all things himself be pre-eminent."

The resultant arrangement is (to use Käsemann's words, in criticism of Lohmeyer's analysis): "a classic example of hymnodic form, unparalleled in the New Testament." ¹³ Lohse states his judgment as follows: "These alterations, however, meddle too much with the given text and do not give evidence sufficient to make probable the hypothesis of two strophes of exact parallel structures." He proceeds, then, to comment: "It is hardly probable that a primitive Christian hymn would have consisted of regularly constructed verses and strophes; rather, the individual strophes probably differed in structure and were composed in the free rhythm of hymnic prose." ¹⁴

III. A NEW PROPOSAL

The division of the hymn into two strophes or stanzas seems to be the most usual, because it is the most natural. Certain (internal) correspondences are striking. As presented in an earlier article published in this QUARTERLY by R. P. Martin, these correspondences consist not only in the recurrence and placement of certain terms, but also in regard to three sets of lines: ¹⁵

15 *Who is the image of
the unseen God, the first-born
of all creation.*

18 *Who is the beginning,
the first-born from the
dead.*

¹¹ Martin, *Colossians*, p. 43.

¹² See above, n. 8.

¹³ Käsemann, *op. cit.* p. 150.

¹⁴ Lohse, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁵ Martin, "An Early Christian Hymn," p. 197.

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 16a <i>For in him</i> were created
all things in heaven and
on earth. | 19 <i>For in him</i> willed all
fulness to dwell. |
| 16c <i>All things through him</i>
and <i>to him</i> have been created. | 20 And <i>through him</i> to reconcile
<i>all things to him</i> . |

Some design in composition seems evident. And the pairing of lines and words suggests a bipartite structural arrangement.

However, it has been difficult to get beyond this point, because "an exactly parallel structure for the strophes can only be achieved through deletions and transpositions."¹⁶ Especially troublesome is the length of Stanza I (124 Greek syllables) in relation to Stanza II (95 Greek syllables).

But there is another structural phenomenon which ought to be noted. There is yet another set of correspondences, which fall between those noted above:

- 17 *And he* is before all,
And all things consist in him.
18a *And he* is the head
of his body, the church.

These two lines are nearly identical in length, consisting of 19 and 18 Greek syllables, respectively. Moreover, they seem to reflect summary statements on each of the two stanzas, respectively—and thus on the hymn as a whole.

Now, if one begins here, at the centre-point of the hymn, and works outward, the data seem to fall into place in a new and different way—and the result is a new perspective on the whole. Perhaps it may be noted here (although this was not the source of our insight): these are the lines which, separated from the previous verses, comprise a third "strophe" in the reconstruction of Schweizer and Martin. In our perception these two lines function as a refrain, quoted here following the first stanza, as would be the usual procedure for a hymn printed without music.

The resultant stanzas (in vss 15-16, and vss 18b-20) are quite comparable in length: in Greek syllables, Stanza I, 87; Stanza II, 95 (92 if the second occurrence of the phrase "through him" in v 20 is omitted, on text-critical grounds¹⁷). What difference there is, when compared with modern hymnody, falls within a standard mean of variation for words and syllables.

Thus, we concur with A. M. Hunter's comment on this hymn: "it betrays the hand of an exacting composer."¹⁸

¹⁶ Lohse, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁷ Cf. B. M. Metzger, Ed., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 621.

¹⁸ A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (rev. ed.; London: S.C.M., 1961), p. 125.

Each of the two stanzas seems to be presented in three sets of statements. (See our translation of the Greek text, which reflects in its arrangement our understanding of the hymn's structure.) The strophic arrangement is not uniform. Structural variations in the two stanzas are quite evident. However, in our opinion, they ought not to be eliminated, but rather appreciated. As they are of a very sophisticated kind, they considerably enrich the general character of the hymn.

IV. LET US SING

We concur with the scholarly conclusion that this hymn was not authored by the Apostle Paul. As R. P. Martin has argued (in part):

The circumstances of the writer as a prisoner is another factor which militates against the production *currente calamo* of a rhythmical passage, in liturgico-hymnic vein, as he dictates a pastoral letter. The elaborate way in which the chapter is built up suggests that what we find in the epistolary context had independent existence; and that the author's mind turns to a Christ-hymn, known to himself and his readers. The hymn is used at an appropriate place to buttress an argument and to enforce an appeal which was already in the writer's mind.

Our conclusion then, is that Colossians 1: 15-20 embodies an early Christian tribute, set in hymnic form, to the church's Lord which the writer borrows from the liturgical praxis which was familiar to both himself and his readers¹⁹

In brief, we have preserved to us a hymn of praise to Christ shared in the memory of the early Christian church through worship in song.

Now, it might be of interest and value to explore the religio-historical setting of this "liturgical praxis." But others have done that. Our concern here is to make some contribution in an area that has not been attended to: the contemporary *Sitz im Leben* of this great Christ-hymn.

Hymns are for singing. But we need also music to which these words may be set. This poses a big question: Is there a familiar hymn tune with comparable hymnic structure (including refrain), metrical pattern (with the same number of lines), and stately mood (consonant with worshipful praise)? Imagine our delight, after considerable research, to find that the tune Joyful Song (to which we sing "Praise Him! Praise Him!") met all the requirements so admirably!

A translation then was made from the Greek text of Col. 1: 15-20 with special attention to the movements of the music and poetics of the words. But the translation is quite faithful to the Greek, as a comparison with any modern version will demonstrate. The adjustments required are no greater than is usual in the translation of a hymn from one language into another: compare for example, the

¹⁹ Martin, "An Early Christian Hymn," pp. 199-200.

various translations of Luther's great majestic hymn, *Ein' Feste Burg* ("A Mighty Fortress").

It is a moving and meaningful experience, to join with the early church, in singing praises to our Lord!

CARMEN CHRISTI

A Hymn of Praise to Christ

Text: Colossians 1: 15-20 (Translated by Wayne McCown)

Tune: Joyful Song ("Praise Him! Praise Him!")

Stanza I

He's the Image
of the invisible Godhead;
Prior to all
things that God did create.
Because in Him
all things were made in the heavens,
And on the earth
visible and unseen.
Whether thrones—,
rulers, lordships or powers,
All things through Him
and unto Him were made.

Refrain

He's before all,
and depends ev'rything on Him;
And He's the Head
of His Body, the Church.

Stanza II

He's the Premier,
From the dead the First to rise—;
That first place He
might have among all things.
Because in Him
was pleased to dwell all God's fullness,
And through Him to
reconcile all to God.
Making peace—,
through the blood of His cross,
Through Him, whether
things on earth or in heav'n.

Our analysis of Col. 1: 15-20 requires no deletions or alterations (no "meddling") in the words of the text. If correct, it suggests that the Apostle has quoted this Christ-hymn verbatim. Really, that is as should be expected: the quotation of familiar poetry or hymnody is expected to be fairly exact. Addition of words and phrases, or rearrangement of lines, is difficult because it goes against the memory (and destroys the purpose for such quotation) and breaks up the poetry and rhythm. Although we seldom observe a speaker or writer quoting the entirety of a hymn (most often only a verse or two with one time through the refrain), usually the rendition offered is as exact as the memory permits. Of course, it generally is accompanied by some commentary in which the speaker or writer identifies

himself with, or distinguishes himself from, the words quoted. And that too Paul has done here, by way of application, in 1: 21-23.

To the point, more specifically: interpretation of the hymn in Col. 1: 15-20 must reckon with the possibility that there are no "additions" in the existing text. The words "of the church" in v 18a, for example, are integral to the structure of the hymn (similarly, the phrase "through the blood of his cross" in v 20). Käsemann (who has been followed in almost all of the subsequent scholarship) overstated his case in asserting, "We are left with only one conceivable solution: These words are to be seen as a Christian redaction of a pre-Christian hymn."²⁰

Our structural proposal opens a whole new tack in study and interpretation of the Christ-hymn in Col. 1: 15-20.

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²⁰ Käsemann, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37. The preceding sentence reads: ". . . the correspondence in form between v. 15 and 18b, dividing the hymn as it does into two parallel and antithetic stanzas, must carry such weight that we are bound to declare τῆς ἐκκλησίας to be a gloss on these grounds alone; the other [religio-historical] considerations we have mentioned clinch the issue."