The Songs we Used to Sing?
Hymn 'Traditions' and Reception in Pauline Letters[1]

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Abstract: This article builds on recent criticism of form-critical approaches to so-called hymnic material in Pauls' letters in an effort to reset the default interpretive stance with respect to Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20. Beginning with a review and critique of previous form-critical criteria, the authors then survey ancient definitions of ὕμνος to demonstrate that the oft posited 'Christ-hymns' do not fulfill these. In an effort to broaden out the discussion, the reception of these passages in early Christian writings is surveyed, showing that it provides no positive support for identifying these passages as 'hymns'. The authors conclude that given the lack of constructive evidence, scholars should reconsider the enduring and widespread operative assumption that these passages are hymns.

Keywords: New Testament, Form Criticism, Hymns, Christ-hymns, Paul, Philippians, Colossians, Early Christian Reception

The form-critical approach to discovering hymns is inextricably linked with the form-critical approach to isolating traditional materials in the Pauline corpus.[2] With a distinguished history reaching back to the pioneering work of Eduard Norden,[3] this approach has nevertheless been subjected to staunch criticism for the better part of half a century. In the words of Erhard Güttgemanns now over forty years old, form criticism produces 'only false hopes and scientific phantoms'.[4] More recently, Morna Hooker has despaired of discovering 'traditions' (including hymnic material) in Paul's letters, saying,

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1 The title is indebted to that excellent group The Drifters. 'The Songs we Used to Sing' can be found on their 1973 album, *The Drifters Now*.

2 We are intentionally limiting this discussion to the Pauline corpus, though it applies in a similar way to other New Testament letters. For a critical reappraisal of form criticism of Gospel materials, see Tuckett 2009, who concludes that form criticism, as practiced by Bultmann, Dibelius, et al. 'is probably no longer sustainable' (37). However, Tuckett allows for the possibility of a chastened form-critical project of tracing the development of individual traditions without making grandiose claims about the origin of a given tradition or the development of the early Christian movement as a whole.

3 Norden 1913; see the history of hymn scholarship recounted in Osborne 2009: 60–72.

4 Güttgemanns 1979: 311 (translated from his 1971 German 2nd edition). The comment was originally aimed at Dibelius' use of form criticism on the Gospel materials, but it applies equally well here. Güttgemanns' criticism of the gospel form criticism has broad implications for the method more generally.

> The search for 'pre-Pauline tradition' in Paul's own letters takes us nowhere. There had probably been little time for anything but the briefest of summaries to develop before Paul's own conversion. If there *are* any quotations in his letters, they are on the whole too brief, and too close to Paul's own beliefs, to enable us to distinguish anything.[5]

It is of course true that Paul did make use of early Christian tradition (broadly construed), as he himself claims, even if he shows some ambivalence as to the source of the material.[6] Further, there are numerous places where Paul claims what might be considered 'traditional' status for something he passed on to a congregation, but is not explicitly acknowledged as being received from an outside source.[7] Difficulties arise, however, not from these general statements, but when a more thoroughgoing account is attempted.

What is true of 'traditions' in general is also true for early Christian hymnody: straightforward as to their existence, but difficult to pin down with certainty. In what follows, we will attempt to reset the default of Pauline scholarship on the so-called 'Christ hymns' in Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20. Rather than presuming them to be hymns of whatever variety or description at the outset, the starting point for analysis must focus on their present context, content, and earliest reception.[8] To that end, this study will (1) examine the classic form-critical criteria used to identify these passages as hymns, (2) analyze the contribution of ancient discussions of hymnody to this issue and (3) survey the reception-history of these passages within Early Christianity. In short, we will argue that the classic criteria ought to be dismissed, that ancient discussions of hymnody do not bring clear answers and that the reception of Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20 in the first three centuries do not provide any positive support to or evidence for the 'hymn' interpretation.

First a quick note on the use of the word 'hymn'. The arguments that Paul (or a 'Pauline' author, if Colossians is not authentic) is 'quoting' hymnic material in these passages have often been focused on a hymn being sung or chanted in communal worship. As will become clear below, the term ὕμνος could be used in a variety of ways in antiquity and several recent interpreters have argued for a revised understanding of these passages as prose hymns. These arguments have yet to gain wide-spread assent, in spite of their clear advantages, and they will be discussed in due course.

1. Hymns and Classic Form Criticism

1.1 Scholarly 'Encouragements'

[5] Hooker 2003: 6; cf. her earlier criticism of form-critical conclusions about 1 Thess 1:9–10 in Hooker 1996.

[6] 1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:1–5, 11; Gal 1:12; cf. a similar statement written to churches Paul had yet to visit in Rom 6:17. See the recent detailed discussion of Paul's witness to formative early Christian instruction in Edsall 2014.

[7] Col 2:6; 1 Thess 2:13; 4:1; Phil 4:9.

[8] Some recent work, such as the massive study by N. T. Wright, abstains from making a clear judgment about authorship or hymnic quality of passages such as Phil 2 and Col 1. Wright refers to the passages as 'poems' and allows for the possibility of their previous composition, but does not explore this possibility, apart from a footnote (Wright 2013, 673 n171), and proceeds to interpret the passages in their epistolary context as accurately reflecting Paul's own view, offering 'a deliberate statement of exactly what Paul wanted to say at this point' (Wright 2013, 680).

In the first place, it is true that early Christians, along with the vast majority of religious groups in antiquity, sang songs of praise to their god ('hymns'). In 1 Cor 14:15, 26, Paul states, 'What then? I pray in the Spirit, and I pray also with my mind; I sing (ψαλῶ) with the Spirit, and I sing also with my mind…What then, brothers? Whenever you come together each one has a psalm (ἕκαστος ψαλμὸν ἔχει)'. Col 3:16 and Eph 5:19 mention 'singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs', though the clause ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν (or τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν) could be taken to indicate a silent 'singing'.[9] Furthermore, the fact that ὕμνος is used together with ψαλμὸς and ᾠδή and that the three are not distinguished suggests to some that 'hymn' here is a general term rather than a specific (metrical or strophic) form of communal worship.[10] In the light of these explicit indicators, scholars have noted other more subtle suggestions. Mark 14:26 tells us that Jesus and the disciples ὑμνήσαντες before leaving the upper room; Acts 16:25 records that Paul and Silas were prayerfully singing 'hymns' to God (προσευχόμενοι ὕμνουν) in prison in Philippi; James 5:13 instructs those who are happy to sing (εὐθυμεῖ τις, ψαλλέτω). These passages, and others beyond the New Testament such as Pliny the Younger's famous account of Christians in Bithynia (*Ep*. 10.96–97), have been taken as 'encouragements' to find these otherwise lost hymns within the extant New Testament texts.[11] In an effort to do this, criteria were posited and hymns were found (as expected!), with the only real remaining task of classification and reconstruction. Even when these criteria became less plausible (see below), the 'encouragements' remained and so, perhaps, they constituted a siren-call of the unknown that was too much for some scholars to resist.[12]

1.2 The Criteria Problem

As already indicated, critical assessments of criteria for identifying 'hymns' in the New Testament are not hard to find.[13] In fact, already in 1925, Henri Leclercq observed that while 'we have some poetic fragments which appear to be quite lyrical and may have been drawn from a form of apostolic euchology, one has no means to prove this.'[14] Nevertheless, it appears that the relevant criticisms have not made the impact they deserve and there remains a relatively optimistic 'hymn-hunting' industry.[15] As claims that Paul is 'quoting' a hymn in

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9 So Moule 1966 [1962]: 27.

10 This is the view of, *inter alios*, Fowl 1990: 33.

11 The language of 'encouragement' is drawn from Ralph Martin's study, where he has a short section (less than one page) entitled 'Encouragements for the Study of New Testament Hymns' (Martin 1967: 18). Note also the comments of Osborne 2009: 59 in discussing the work of Martin Hengel in this area.

12 Michael Peppard has recently critiqued the NA[27] for formatting Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20 as hymns (i.e. indented and divided into strophes), arguing that it involves a 'furtive perlocutionary act' in which theological interests in early high Christology are served; Peppard 2008: 338–339. Peppard's critique is illuminating, if scathing at times, and reinforces the need to reset the default position of scholarship on the identification of these passages.

13 Generally, see Peppard 2008, Vollenweider 2010: 210–211, and now Löhr 2014: 157–161. Aside from Peppard's work, other critiques of 'hymnic' identification in Anglophone literature are typically oblique or a small part of another larger project. On Phil 2:6–11, see Fee 1992; Bockmuehl 1997a: 116–121; Reumann 2008: 339. Note the earlier criticisms of form-critical reconstructions in Dunn 1977 and Güttgemanns 1979. Among German and French scholars, however, the criticisms directed specifically at hymnic concerns have been more forthcoming; cf. the account in Osborne 2009: 72–80.

14 Leclercq 1925: 2826–2928, 2830; see also Lash 1982.

15 Lash 1982: 293. This line was written prior to the publication of Brucker and Löhr's contributions in Leonhard and Löhr 2014, on which see further below. That volume is, hopefully, indicative of the fact that the hymn-hunting industry is dying down and that criticisms have finally taken solid root.

Phil 2:6–11 persist,[16] we will risk redundancy and try to show the problematic nature of these criteria.

Ralph Martin, in his influential 1967 study, proposed five criteria that have been more-or-less accepted by subsequent scholars.[17] They are: (1) the presence of an introductory formula (citing Eph 5:14 and 1 Tim 3:16), (2) the use of rhythmical style and (3) unusual vocabulary, (4) the presence of theological concepts (especially Christological doctrines) expressed in 'exalted' and 'liturgical' language and (5) a cultic *milieu* for the passage (again citing Eph 5:14).[18] None of these criteria is valid on its own terms and even collectively, they do not amount to finding a hymn. In the first place, neither passage cited as an example of an introductory formula includes the language of singing. Ephesians 5:14, for instance, simply reads διὸ λέγε, though we are not told who (or what) says this thing, where it is said, when it is said (despite Martin's confidence in a baptismal context) or how it is said.[19] This stands in contrast with the introductions in Rev 5:9 and 15:3–4 where singing is indicated.[20] The presence of 'rhythmical style' is not necessarily an indicator of anything other than careful composition. Indeed, it was common in the Greco-Roman world to be concerned with the rhythm of one's speech in formal contexts.[21] This did not shade those speeches toward being hymns. Unusual vocabulary is simply that: unusual. In order to assess whether or not something is so unusual to necessitate a quotation of a foreign textual body we would need much more material than we have to quantify Paul's vocabulary and thus it is not a useful criterion by which to identify hymns.[22] The criterion concerning the presence of theological concepts is broad and could be applied to such varied materials and contexts as to be useless as a criterion for anything other than theological concern. Finally, a cultic *milieu* is precisely what we don't have in any of our examples. There is no place where Paul tells us that the 'tradition' or 'hymn' that follows occurs in the context of a communal gathering. What we do have is an *epistolary milieu*. Martin's 'baptismal motifs' in Eph 5:14, even if they were not debatable, are not enough. Suggestions of actions that may have happened in a cultic setting do not necessitate an *actual* cultic setting for the words themselves.

In spite of these problems, the confidence in these and similar criteria have become so

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16 For example, Anthony Thiselton's recent introduction to Paul uses the language of 'quoting' with respect to Phil 2; Thiselton 2009: 45.

17 Later developments of his criteria can be found in Gloer 1984 and Longenecker 1999 and, from a different angle, Ellis 2001: 139 and Yarbrough 2009: 41–51. Yarbrough is building specifically on Ellis, who is focused on 'traditions' more broadly than just hymnic material. Yarbrough adds the criterion that hymns are 'a series of confessional phrases that are rich in doctrine, frequently soteriologically driven, or christocentrically focused, and presented in some type of melodic or poetic format' (30). It is not clear, however, that hymns really are 'a series of confessional phrases' or that any such series, if found, would constitute a hymn. Further, texts are not 'melodic', which is the quality of a thing heard rather than read, and the question of 'poetic format' is precisely what is at stake in identifying hymns and so cannot be used as a criterion for the task at hand. For a critique of Gloer, see Peppard 2008.

18 Martin 1967: 18–19.

19 For further discussion of the singing or chanting of hymns, see below.

20 5:9, καὶ ᾄδουσιν ᾠδὴν καινὴν λέγοντες…; 15:3, καὶ ᾄδουσιν τὴν ᾠδὴν Μωϋσεως τοῦ δούλου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν ᾠδὴν τοῦ ἀρνίου λέγοντες…

21 Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.3.75–8; Peppard 2008: 324. See the account of *compositio* in Lausberg 1998 [1960]: 411ff in which he shows that careful prose composition was equivalent to construction of poetic verse (citing Quintilian, *Inst*. 9.4.116 among others). Note also the advice of Demetrius of Phalerum (c. 2nd–1st cent BCE) that the letter style should be 'plain' (ἰσχνότητος) but more styled (ὑποκατεσκευάσθαι) than natural dialogue (*Eloc*. 223–224). There was, of course, a variety of views on the style of letters; see the introduction, texts and translations in Malherbe 1988.

22 Cf. the comments in Fee 1992.

embedded in New Testament scholarship that they are extremely difficult to dislodge. Matthew Gordley's careful monograph on didactic hymnody in antiquity acknowledges certain criticisms against form-critical identification of 'hymnic' passages and then dismisses them with a reference to works by W.H. Gloer and Richard Longenecker who, he notes, do 'not address the major lines of critique'.[23] Later, Gordley refers readers to Stauffer's 1955 *New Testament Theology* for the 'standard criteria for detecting confessional material'.[24] Stauffer himself gives twelve criteria which are no less problematic than those discussed above and, in general, can be collapsed into Martin's five criteria.[25] It is clear, then, that even the most recent discussions of hymns in the New Testament rely on criteria that have been strongly criticized since their proposal over half a century ago.[26]

Before moving on, we should note that in all of these efforts to identify 'traditional' and 'hymnic' material, there is an assumption (only rarely articulated) that Paul's letters as a whole were not the end result of careful composition. To return to Gordley, he argues that 'the use of parallelism and other poetic features suggests that this passage [Col 1:15–20] was composed very deliberately and carefully and not simply in the moment of the writing of the epistle'.[27] The contrast drawn here between careful composition and the apparently less careful writing of an epistle is based on a problematic understanding of Paul's process of letter composition. E. R. Richards, among others, has demonstrated that letter-writing in antiquity *was* a matter of composing texts 'deliberately and carefully'. In many cases it involved multiple drafts, incorporation of disparate notes, dictation to a scribe, and/or a final reading and signing by the author.[28] The 'moment' of writing, then, was not a slapdash event with little thought or preparation, but a process of deliberate composition in which a section of heightened prose with (more-or-less) balanced phrases is intelligible without the need to posit quotation from 'tradition' of one sort or another.

2. Defining Hymns: From Sung Hymn to Prose Hymn

Turning from the classic form-critical criteria, the question now is whether or not the term 'hymn', as used in antiquity, can be applied meaningfully to Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20. We will begin with the most narrow definitions and broaden out from there.

2.1 Ancient Hymns: Three Categories

Most commonly in Greek literature, the term ὕμνος refers to a song in praise of a god or other divine figure.[29] It was composed in a poetic meter[30] and commonly associated with cult

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[23] Gordley 2011: 270 and n. 43 citing Gloer 1984 and Longenecker 1999; cf. n. 16 above.

[24] Gordley 2011: 281 and n. 48; cf. the entirely uncritical acceptance of Stauffer's and Gloer's works in Gordley 2007: 8–9.

[25] Stauffer's criteria are rooted in the earlier work of Norden 1913, which has been criticized numerous times; cf. Berger 1984: 1163–1169 and Peppard 2008.

[26] On a related front, it is worth noting the work of Calhoun 2011 who – through cogent rhetorical analysis and comparison with 'extended mythological epithets' for divine figures in other Greek, Roman and Jewish literature – effectively undermines the application of similar form-critical criteria in identifying 'traditional' material in Rom 1:3–4, 16–17.

[27] Gordley 2011: 289.

[28] See especially Richards 2004 and also his earlier work on the use of secretaries in antiquity; Richards 1991.

[29] Note the general definition of a hymn in Vollenweider 2010: 212: '"Lied für einen Gott", "Gesang, der

activities, though it could also include private 'devotional' hymns.[31]

Second, and more broadly, the term 'hymn' could be used to designate any song of praise to a god, including those without meter. In a technical sense, then, these fall into a category of 'prose hymns', though they should be distinguished from the rhetorical prose hymn discussed below.[32] According to Furley and Bremmer, a hymn in this sense

> is distinguished from normal speech by any or all of the following features: words uttered by a group of people in unison; melody; metre or rhythm; musical accompaniment; dance performed either by the hymn-singers themselves or an associated group; repetition from occasion to occasion.[33]

The biblical *locus classicus* for this category of 'hymn' often adduced in connection with the Christ hymns is found in the Psalter, with its defining structural characteristics of strophic organization and parallelism.[34]

The very broadest definition of a 'hymn' is provided by Matthew Gordley in his attempt to encompass all texts that are referred to as hymns in Greco-Roman antiquity. He states,

> A hymn is a self-contained composition of relatively short length…whose contents are primarily centered on praise of the divine in a descriptive or declarative style, which may be expressed in direct address…or in the third person…whether in poetry or prose, and whose primary purpose may have been liturgical or instructional.[35]

This corresponds to the widest use of the term ὕμνος in antiquity, as in Theon's *Progymnasmata,*[36] in which 'hymns' were a subset of epideictic rhetoric approached in the same manner (ἔφοδος) as encomia (directed at non-divine subjects).[37] This is the rhetorical prose hymn famously used by Aelius Aristides in the second century CE.[38] These 'hymns' were rhetorical exercises most often employed in competitions which could teach the listeners and honor the god, but were not designed for repetition and were performed without

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Götter als Inhalt und Gegenüber hat"'; cf. Burkert 1994: 9. Aelius Aristides notes the commonness of sung poetic hymns in his own rhetorical defense of praising the gods in prose, i.e., a prose hymn (cf. *Or*. 43.1 and *Or.* 45.1–14). This is also in keeping with the definition provided by Augustine *In psalmum* 72.1 – 'Hymni laudes sit Dei cum cantico…Si sit laus, et non sit Dei, non est hymnus'; noted by Osborne 2009: 78 n. 1. See further below.

30 So Vollenweider 2010: 214 who notes the efforts of Josephus, Philo and a translator of the Isis Aretology to identify their 'hymns' with Greek poetic meter. This is not to be confused with arguments about 'rhythmical style' which lacks the precision of poetic meter.

31 See the discussion in Furley and Bremer 2001: 20–35; cf. Brucker 1997: 55.

32 On this point, see esp. Furley and Bremer 2001: 48–49 with bibliography; cf. Vollenweider 2010: 219, who cites the Psalms and the Isis Aretology as as examples.

33 Furley and Bremer 2001: 2.

34 Note that *4 Macc* 18:15 claims that David composed 'hymns', in reference to the psalms (τὸν ὑμνογράφον ἐμελῴδει ὑμῖν Δαυιδ λέγοντα πολλαὶ αἱ θλίψεις τῶν δικαίων). Parallelism has long played a central role in the analysis of Hebrew poetry from the time of Robert Lowth (1753); cf. Segert 1984: 1438–1439 and the discussion in Fowl 1990: 39 and Brucker 1997: 23–35 (who consider it a problematic poetic indicator) and Gordley 2007: 52–56 (who argues for the value of parallelism when it is seen in conjunction with other elements such as a terse style).

35 Gordley 2007: 32–33 cf. also Vollenweider 2010: 221: 'Ein Hymnus besteht in lobendem bzw. preisendem Sprechen oder Singen *von* und *zu* göttlichen Wesen (Sprechrichtung)'.

36 So similarly in Menander Rhetor 331.15–20, ἔπαινος δέ τις γίνεται, ὁτὲ μὲν εἰς θεούς, ὁτὲ δὲ εἰς τὰ θνητά· καὶ ὅτε μὲν εἰς θεούς, ὕμνους καλοῦμεν; text from Russell and Wilson 1981.

37 Theon (Spengel 109.22–26); cf. the discussion in Brucker 1997: 131 who nevertheless does not emphasize the use of 'hymn' here or in the later work of Menander Rhetor.

38 Cf. Aristides *Or*. 43.1: ὑπισχνούμενος ὕμνον ἐρεῖν Διὸς, καὶ ταῦτα ἄνευ μέτρου. See the discussion in Russell 1990.

singing by the author.[39] In fact, this link between hymns and encomia was in place at least from the time of Plato (ὓμνους θειοῖς καὶ ἐξκώμια τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς, Plato *Pol*. 10.607a), though it is not at all clear that Plato allowed for non-sung (or even non-metrical) hymns; it simply indicates that hymns (however formally marked) were related to encomia.[40] Nevertheless, by the first century, praising a god in prose was widely practiced and by the second century and later this praise was more widely referred to as a 'hymn'.[41] Terminological caution is required, however, since although it is clear that there were common tropes for the praise of the divine in prose in the first century, it is *not* clear that all parties would have been happy to categorize them as hymns. As Samuel Vollenweider points out, Plato's speech of praise to Eros in the *Symposium* (4th century BCE) shows that encomia for the divine had already developed 'entirely apart from a direct link to the hymnic tradition'.[42] This opens up the possibility that one person's hymn may well have been another's encomium and emphasizes the constructive aspect of Gordley's definition, which he in fact recognizes by calling it an 'etic' definition.[43]

2.2 'Christ-hymns' Among the Ancient Hymns

How then do these three categories apply to the so-called Christ-hymns in question? First, given that there is no poetic meter for either Phil 2:6–11 or Col 1:15–20, these passages can safely be rejected as hymns by the most narrow definition of metered song.[44]

Much more commonly, scholars attempt to link the NT 'Christ-hymns' with the second category by arranging them in strophes and organizing the strophes by various types of parallelism.[45] As for the strophic structure of the so-called Christ-hymns in Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20, scholars cannot agree whether or not this is present and, if so, how each should be divided.[46] In the absence of other viable form-critical criteria (discussed above), one is only left with an observation of limited parallelism (the structure of which is itself difficult and debated). Even granting that parallelism is a *feature* of psalms, parallelism is insufficient as a positive *indicator* of poetry because it is not *limited* to psalms (or 'hymns'), as its

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39 Cf. Hardie 1983: 99.

40 This is in fact the case with many ancient discussions. Alexander Numenius (2nd cent. CE), for example, also pairs 'hymn' with encomia, though he never makes it clear that this means that 'hymns' need not be in meter or sung. It simply is not discussed, which implies that whatever the answer, he expected his readers already to understand what constituted a 'hymn' *formally*, while he explains how to arrange the *contents* of the 'hymn'; see the texts and discussion in Gordley 2007: 117–118, who assumes that non-metrical and non-sung hymns are implied.

41 See the discussion in Hardie 1983: 99–100 and passim; Russell 1990; Krentz 1995; Furley and Bremer 2001: 48–49; Vollenweider 2010: 215–216.

42 Vollenweider 2010: 215. Löhr 2014: 163 n. 25 cites Norden's opinion that Plato's speech is an early prose hymn, though he does not comment on it.

43 Gordley 2007: 133 n. 80; cf. Löhr's comment (2014: 162) that '"hymn" is an umbrella term which covers a vareity of texts and sub-genres'. A generalized 'etic' definition of a hymn allows Gordley and others to treat the oft-cited passage from Quintilian (*Inst*. 3.7.6–8) as a discussion of 'prose hymn' despite its lack of 'hymn' terminology (*paean* or cognates; *hymnus* or cognates); cf. also the slippage in Russell 1990: 207–209; Krentz 1995: 56–57; and Collins 2003: 370.

44 Cf. Berger 1984: 1151, 'Weder die Christushymnen (wie etwa Phil 2,6–11; 1 Tim 3,16) noch die Hymnen der Apk sind der antiken Gattung ὓμνος einzuordnen'. See Löhr 2014: 170, 'meter and rhyme are not the primary building principles of the texts in question' (namely, Col 1:15–20 and Luke 1–2).

45 See note 33 above.

46 Cf. Bockmuehl 1997a: 116–121; Reumann 2008: 339. This point is noted also by proponents of the 'hymn' interpretation, such as Gordley 2011: 288 on Col 1:15–20.

extensive use in Proverbs, Sirach, and Prophetic oracles demonstrates.[47] Parallelism, then, is indeed slim grounds on which to declare these passages to be hymns.

In fact, the length of these passages greatly limits the analytical possibilities. The nearly consistent tripartite structure of cultic hymns throughout Greek and Roman antiquity – invocation, praise and prayer[48] – is notably lacking from these passages. Neither Phil 2:6–11 nor Col 1:15–20 include either an invocation or a prayer. It is often argued, following Eduard Norden, that the relative pronouns at the beginning of Phil 2:6 and Col 1:15 indicate that they were originally preceded by some form of address.[49] In context, however, the relative pronoun fulfills a perfectly normal grammatical role that hardly requires recourse to hypothetical lost invocations to explain. Further, in the case of Colossians, it is unclear why the relative pronoun in 1:15 receives this treatment when 1:13 also begins with a relative pronoun.[50] In fact, according to Klaus Berger, this use of relative pronouns is not common in Greek hymnody.[51] If this is the case, then this common reading of the relative pronoun is revealed as remarkably circular: we know that this is a hymn because it is begun with the relative pronoun; we know the relative pronoun fulfills this function because it does so in this hymn. Unlike arguments for the lost invocation, there is no trace of a final 'prayer' section for either of these passages.[52]

What of the broadest definition, the rhetorical prose hymn? In a situation where a hymn consists in non-sung, non-cultic praise of a god, Gordley rightly notes that 'the content is the surest indicator that one is dealing with a hymn'.[53] In this light the applicability of this definition to Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20 is entirely dependent on one's reading of Paul's Christology, since apart from worshiping Christ as God, these passages could equally be construed as praising Jesus as Lord (but not necessarily as God or even divine).[54] Rather than begging the question of Christology, then, it is perhaps best to avoid the language of 'hymn' and speak instead simply of 'praise', as in Ralph Brucker's proposed terminology of *Christuslob*.[55]

Even if we grant that the passages in question *are* prose hymns (in the sense of prose encomia directed at a divine figure), this does not in any way require them to be citations of *previously composed* hymns. Moreover, this understanding does not get us any closer to finding the 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' that are sought by so many scholars as part of

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47 The classic argument against the value of parallelism in distinguishing poetry and prose is Kugel 1981, who argues for a spectrum from lesser to greater eloquence, rather than a clear distinction. In the words of Osborne 2009: 79, 'On a constaté également que les traits dits "charactéristiques" d'un "hymne" ne sont des indices ni spécifiques ni exclusifs d'un genre littéraire "hymne"'.

48 See esp. Furley and Bremer 2001: 50–51; cf. Vollenweider 2010: 217. This tripartite division was also noted by Norden 1913. The general structure is also found among the Psalms (e.g., Ps 3) as well as in Indo-Iranian hymns, on which see Tichy 1994.

49 Cf. the bibliography and critique in Peppard 2008: 325–326. Collins 2003: 370 notes that cultic hymns often began with invocations, but literary hymns such as Homeric Hymns and Aelius Aristides' prose-hymns differ in this respect.

50 So Peppard 2008: 325.

51 Berger 1984: 1153, cf. pp. 1168–1169. However, Berger maintains that this *is* a common feature of Christian hymnody.

52 Löhr similarly concludes that 'direct evidence' for Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20 being sung or chanted as hymns 'is missing'; Löhr 2014: 171.

53 Gordley 2007: 33.

54 This is in fact the burden of Brucker's entire argument.

55 Brucker 1997, passim. Brucker 2014: 11 concludes that 'epideictic passages' is the best descriptor for such elevated prose. Vollenweider 2010: 225 argues for the phrase 'ein hymnisches Christuslob', though it is not clear that 'hymnische' adds clarity to the analysis.

early Christian worship. We simply lack the most important distinguishing factors to identify such hymns, namely performance.[56] But there is a further, largely unexplored, aspect of this question: do we have any evidence that these passages were used as hymns in their subsequent reception?

3. Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20 in Reception

Michael Peppard claims in passing that 'not one source from early Christianity regards any of the passages identified as poems or hymns'.[57] Since this observation is not justified or developed, the question remains, how *were* these texts received and used in early Christian writings. And, particularly, what does their reception indicate for the widespread assumption that Col 1:15–20 and Phil 2:6–11 are hymns?

A survey of the use of excerpts from these two pericopes within pre-Nicene texts offers much fodder for our study, since excerpts from these two passages are amongst the most frequently cited Pauline texts in the whole of early Christian literature.[58] Therefore, an examination of their use across a range of authors and genres is possible, allowing us to determine ways that these pericopes were used within the emerging theological arguments of early Christianity. Early Christian writings offer first-hand evidence of the history of exegesis of a text, not only in terms of the form in which it was read and available to early Christians in different times and places, but also in terms of the variety of hermeneutical approaches with which the texts are used and the role they play in early Christian arguments, doctrinal and otherwise.[59] In particular, Bart Ehrman is clear that the 'untapped' study of patristic reception of the New Testament 'can tell us a good deal about the history of exegesis and the nature of early Christian theological developments and social conflicts, and the role that these matters themselves played in the transmission of the Christian scriptures.'[60]

Patristic reception, therefore, offers support and evidence for the identification of a text beyond the hunt for particular criteria or markers of a hymn, since this reception allows us to examine the content and context of *how* a passage was used within early Christian works. Thus, if texts such as Col 1:15–20 and Phil 2:6–11 were understood to be hymns by the earliest Christians, we might hope to find evidence for such understanding within their extant writings. It is true, of course, that Greco-Roman writers do not always identify the genre of the text-type they use to make an argument, often assuming that the reader knows that they are using a well-known (for them) hymn or piece of prose. Nevertheless, it remains valuable to note that a lack of positive evidence for the treatment of these two Pauline pericopes as hymns is a silence that needs to be taken into account.

3.1 Colossians 1:15–20

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56 Cf. the definition of Furley and Bremmer noted earlier. Incidentally, if Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20 were prose hymns composed for the letter by Paul (or 'Paul', if one is inclined against the authenticity of Colossians), then indications of performance would be lacking as a matter of course. Acknowledging this is a strong point of Collins' analysis of Phil 2:6–11, just as a reliance on form-critical criteria (discussed above) to argue that Col 1:15–20 quotes 'traditional material' is a weak point in that of Gordley.

57 Peppard 2008: 324.

58 See Strawbridge 2014.

59 See Ehrman 1995: 127–128 and McGuckin 2002: 309.

60 Ehrman 1995: 135.

While the Colossian epistle is not cited as frequently by early Christian writers as other New Testament epistles, in a comprehensive survey of the use of Pauline texts in pre-Nicene writings,[61] Col 1:15–20 is referred to more than any other pericope across the Pauline spectrum.[62] Scattered across early Christian preaching, teaching, and apologies, excerpts from this pericope are used over 670 times by more than 50 different pre-Nicene authors. As Lightfoot – one of the few scholars to take patristic use of this passage into account in his commentary – acknowledges, the 'history of patristic exegesis of this [pericope] is not without painful interest'.[63] In particular, the words and images of Col 1:15–20 offer a veritable goldmine of references to support emerging doctrinal and Christological claims, and are especially used by early Christians to explicate more clearly the person and nature of Christ.

Finding themselves challenged by notions of a divided Christ (two natures) and a divided God (Father and Son), early Christian writers used excerpts from this pericope to support their arguments and in the process, to effect the theological developments of the church. Amongst early Christian writers, this passage triggers different images and comparisons in a way that is more imagistic and poetical than argumentative, even though many of the references are found within apologetic works and treatises. Rarely cited as a whole, excerpts from this pericope are used to establish that God the Father may be known through God the Son ('the image of the invisible God' in 1:15),[64] to argue for the pre-existence of Christ ('first-born of all creation' in 1:15),[65] to describe and defend bodily resurrection ('first-born from the dead' in 1:18),[66] and to describe Jesus as the mediator between humankind and God (the language of 'thrones and dominions' in 1:18).[67]

The consistency in the use of this passage by early Christian writers is striking. Irenaeus uses excerpts from Col 1, for example, to uphold his understanding that Christ is pre-eminent and that his death and resurrection lead to the defeat of death because as 'image of the invisible God', 'head of the Church', and 'first-born from the dead', Christ exists before all and goes before all even in death. Excepts from Col 1 play a central role in his adaptation of the rhetorical concept of recapitulation (*anakephalaiosis),* and thus he writes that there is 'one God the Father and one Christ Jesus, who is coming throughout the whole ordering, and recapitulating all things in himself. In this all is a man, the image of God and thus he

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61 See Strawbridge 2014.

62 Since early Christian writers assume Pauline authorship of the Colossian epistle, any shadows cast by modern scholarship on the authenticity of this letter do not affect our survey; cf Origen, *Princ,* 2.6.1; Novatian, *Trin,* 3.

63 Lightfoot 1890: 146. Apart from Lightfoot, few if any modern commentaries on Colossians make reference to early Christian writings on the text itself and even then, many simply offer a summary of Lightfoot's work. See Wilson 2005: 135–136.

64 For some examples in early Christian writings where Jesus is described as 'image of the invisible God', see: Clement of Alexandria, *Proten,* 10.23–26; Origen, *Cels,* 7.27; 7.43; *Princ,* 1.2.6; *Comm.Jn,* 32.39; *Hom.Gen,* 1.13; Novatian, *Trin,* 18.1–3.

65 For example, see: Justin Martyr, *Dial,* 84; 100; 125; Tatian, *Orat,* 5.2; Melito of Sardis, *Pass,* 82; Irenaeus, *Haer,* 1.22.1; 3.16.3; Theophilus, *Autol,* 2.22.11; Tertullian, *Prax,* 5.19.3–5; 7.1; Origen, *Comm.Jn.,* 28.18; *Comm.Cant,* Pr; 1.1; 2.1; *Comm.Mt;* 16.8; *Cels,* 2.25; 6.47–48; 6.63–64; 6.69; 8.26; *Hom.Gen.,* 1.13; *Hom.Jer,* 1.8.1; *Hom.Num.,* 3.4.

66 See, for example, *Ep.Lugd,* 2; Irenaeus, *Haer,* 2.22.4; *Demonst,* 38–40; Hippolytus, *Fr.Qu,* 1; Origen, *Comm.Jo,* 1.108; 1.117–118; 1.121; *Comm.Rom,* 1.6.3; *Comm.Cant,* 1.3; *Cels,* 2.77; *Princ,* 1.3.7; *Comm.Ps,* Ps 16.9; Methodius, *Res,* 1.1.13; 2.1.13. We note that in some places, it is difficult to determine whether early Christian writers are using Col 1:18 or Rev 1:5 in their writings.

67 For example, see: Hippolytus, *Noet,* 6; Tertullian, *Marc,* 5.19.4–5; Origen, *Princ.* 1.5.1; 1.5.3; 1.8.4; 2.6.1; 2.9.4; 4.30; *Hom.Lev,* 7.2; Eusebius, *Dem.Ev,* 7.Pr.

recapitulated humankind in himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible (Col 1:15–16)'.[68] This same Colossian excerpt is also a key text for Clement of Alexandria and for Origen, who defend the incorporeal and invisible nature of God as that which is revealed only in Jesus Christ. Thus, Origen writes that 'Scripture says that God is incorporeal. That is why no one has ever seen God (John 1:18) and the first-born of all creation is said to be an image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), using invisible in the sense of incorporeal'.[69] Excerpts from Col 1 are used to help early Christians navigate the tensions they find within Scripture, especially as they attempt to reconcile the visible Incarnate Son of God with the phrase from John 1:18 that God cannot be seen. For different writers, therefore, 'image of the invisible God' from Col 1 and the other Christological attributes that follow trigger different images, ideas, and comparisons that allow them to support and defend their theological arguments.

What is most striking for our purposes, however, is not the diversity of use of this pericope by early Christian writers, but that in its use this pericope is not treated as a hymn or placed in a liturgical setting. Rather, the images and phrases within this text are adapted and integrated into early Christian writings and used to bolster early Christian arguments. Patristic reception of this text, therefore, challenges contemporary exegetical sensibilities and assumptions about the genre and composition of Col 1:15–20. Moreover, the high frequency of the use of this passage and its role in supporting early Christian writers in their Christological and theological arguments both point to the understanding that this pericope was a crucial text for formation in early Christianity – both in terms of formation of doctrine and formation of Christians themselves.[70] However, this understanding cannot go so far as to support the conclusion of Käsemann that Col 1:15–20 is part of a pre-baptismal liturgical text, nor the view of Gordley that this text could have been a didactic hymn.[71] Thus, we end up close to where we began, only now with the support of patristic evidence: without a way of identifying Col 1:15–20 as a hymn with any degree of confidence.

3.2 Philippians 2:6–11

Turning to Phil 2:6–11, as one might expect from the preceding section, conclusions about the use of this pericope within early Christian writings are similar to those of Col 1:15-20. In fact, in the same survey of the use of Pauline texts by early Christian writers, excerpts from Phil 2:6–11 rank very closely to excerpts from Col 1 in their high frequency of use. Moreover, excerpts from these two texts are often (and noticeably) found in close proximity to one another within pre-Nicene Christian writings.[72]

Occurring more than 570 times in writings before 325 CE, excerpts from Phil 2:6–11 are of fundamental importance for Christological arguments and emerging doctrine, and the use

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68 Irenaeus, *Haer*, 3.16.6 (transl. John Behr 2001: 126–127 with adaptations).

69 Origen, *Cels*, 7.27 (*SC* 150). Origen expands on this in *Princ*, 1.1.8 and 2.4.3. See also Clement of Alexandria, *Proten*, 10.23–26. Novatian is also concerned about the visible nature of the Son and the invisible nature of the Father and uses excerpts from Col 1 in his writings, as well. See Novatian, *Trin*, 18.1–3.

70 This statement is particularly supported by studies in ancient history which find that texts most frequently cited in the literary writings of a particular time are likely the texts that were being taught in formative settings. See Morgan 1998: 105–107 and also Strawbridge 2014: 2–7, 248–49.

71 Gordley 2011: 269; cf. pp. 229–230 and 268–90. See also Käsemann 1960: 34–51; Bockmuehl 1997a: 117; Lincoln 2000: 602–605.

72 E.g, Clement of Alexandria, *Theod*, 19, 43; Tertullian, *Marc*, 5.20.3–4; *Prax*, 10; Origen, *Comm.Jn*, 10.23; *Hom.Gen*, 1.13; Novatian, *Trin*, 13.1–2; Eusebius, *Eccl.Hist*, 11.19.4.

of this passage in early Christian writings are numerous (as are comments on it still today).[73] Thus, similar to early Christian use of Col 1:15–20, excerpts from Phil 2 are used by early Christian writers to describe Christ as equal to and undivided from God (Phil 2:6),[74] the form that Christ took up, both that of a slave and of God (Phil 2:7),[75] and the nature of Christ's exhaltation to glory (Phil 2:8–9).[76] An examination of the context and content of the use of excerpts from Phil 2, compared with that of Col 1, further suggests that early Christians were using both of these passages to support arguments for the pre-existence of Christ: the one who took on the form of a slave, through whom God created all things, and who reconciles all things to himself.[77]

In this way, for example, Tertullian uses excerpts from Phil 2:6–7 to defend his understanding of Christ as undivided and not separated into two beings or forms, human and divine. Against Marcion, who appears to use excerpts from Phil 2 to argue Christ is not fully human and his flesh only imaginary, Tertullian replies that, 'Of course the Marcionites suppose that they have the apostle on their side in the following passage in the matter of Christ's substance, that in Christ there was nothing but a phantom of flesh'.[78] Paul, however, he argues, is clear that Christ,

> being in the form of God, he thought it robbery to be equal to God; but emptied himself and took upon him the form of a servant (Phil 2:6–7), not the reality, and was made in the likeness of man, not a man, and was found in the form of man, not in his substance, that is to say, his flesh. Just as if to a substance there did not accrue both form and likeness and fashion.[79]

Tertullian is not only eager to claim the words of Paul as supportive of his theology and not that of Marcion, but to prove that if Marcion's claim that Christ is only a phantom of flesh and therefore not fully human is true, then an unintended consequence of this position is that Christ is not fully God either.[80] As with early Christian use of Col 1, here again in this brief example, the images and phrases from Phil 2 are being adopted and adapted by Tertullian as a part of his larger theological defense. His reference to the text itself acknowledges that it is a writing of the Apostle Paul, but gives the excerpts no further context.

That early Christians used both Phil 2 and Col 1 in close proximity with one another should not be taken as evidence that they were recognised as similar form or genre such as a hymn, but rather that the images and phrases they offer were used by early Christians to

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73 So Bockmuehl writes that, regarding to scholarship on this Philippian pericope, 'none but the most conceited could claim to have mastered the secondary literature, and none but the dullest would find pleasure or interest in wading through it' (Bockmuehl 1997b: 1). Furthermore, Coakley is clear that 'any pert generalizations about patristic interpretation of this matter [Phil 2 in early Christian writings] would therefore be foolhardy' (Coakley 2006: 249).

74 See Tertullian, *Marc*, 5.40.3–5; *Prax*, 10; Origen, *Princ*, 1.2.8; *Hom.Gen*, 1.13; Novatian, *Trin*, 22.2; Methodius, *Conviv*, 1.4.24; and perhaps even *Ascension of Isaiah* 8.9–10 and *Odes of Solomon* 7.4–6.

75 See Tertullian, *Marc*, 5.40.4–5; Origen, *Princ.* Pr.1.4; Eusebius, *Theol.eccl*, 8.293; *Demst*, 10.1.22.

76 See Origen, *Princ*, 1.2.8; *Cels*, 8.59.

77 See Martin 1967: 111–112, 290–293; Sanders 1971: 77–79; Grillmeier 1975: 1:17; Hengel 1976; Bockmuehl 1997a: 42 n. 130; Edwards 1999: xxii; Bauckham 2008: 235.

78 Tertullian, *Marc*, 5.20.3 (*CCL* 1).

79 Tertullian, *Marc*, 5.20.3–4 (*CCL* 1).

80 See Tertullian, *Marc*, 5.20.4 and also *Prax*, 10. Note that for Tertullian, substance (*substantia*) is central to his understanding of how the Father and Son are related to one another. Substance is that which unifies the Father and Son despite their different forms so that God the Father and God the Son are inseparable in a unity that is 'a unity of substance, not a singularity of number' (Stead 1963: 46, 55). See also Tertullian, *Prax*, 25.

uphold both the undivided nature of God and the unity of God the Son as fully human and fully divine. A study of early Christian use of Phil 2, therefore, confirms the conclusion of Bockmuehl that, 'the existing evidence is too limited to permit any definite conclusions about the specific identification, setting, and use of first-century Christian hymnic texts.'[81] The early reception of these texts does not determine whether or not these passages once existed as hymns. Rather, it leaves us with silence, though it is a pregnant silence.

4. Conclusion

While Andrew Lincoln questions whether Col 1:15–20 is really a hymn,[82] and even Gordley acknowledges that there is ultimately 'too little evidence to draw firm conclusions' about early Christian hymns and liturgy,[83] both argue that it is still not implausible that Paul might quote a hymn in the course of his writing and identify Col 1:15–20, as well as Phil 2:6–11, as examples. Even Käsemann – who notes that no exant manuscript can be found that could be called a 'proto-hymn' upon which the Colossian 'hymn' is based, and that the identification of this passage as such is based solely on structural and syntactical studies – still places Col 1:15–20 in the context of a pre-baptismal liturgical text.[84] These views, however, are severely challenged not only by a review of the varied criteria used to identify a hymn, but also by the reality that the use and identification of these passages as hymns are not reflected in their reception within early Christian texts.

A comparative example of reception from another NT book is instructive for this conclusion. The Lukan canticles (Luke 1:46–55, 68–79; 2:29–32, traditionally referred to respectively as the *Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, and *Nunc dimittis*) have long been taken as 'hymns' imbedded in the text of Luke. It is debated, of course, whether they were pre-existing 'hymns' that arose in a Jewish-Christian context (usually based on the high concentration of vocabulary and syntax from the Greek Jewish scriptures) and included by 'Luke' or composed by the author himself.[85] In either case, none of the three are portrayed as occurring during a cultic or ritual context, involving music, singing, dancing or collective participation. They lack a typical 'hymnic' performance. Even the introductory words lack definite hymnic indicators: Mary εἶπεν, Zachariah ἐπροφήτευσεν and Simeon εὐλόγησεν τὸν θεὸν καὶ εἶπεν. It is, of course, true that these passages feel at times like a pastiche of elements from the Psalms, but that in itself is not determinative.

What these passages have that the so-called Christ-hymns lack is a *reception in a collection of songs praising God*. The Lukan canticles, severed from their literary context, were included quite quickly among the LXX Odes, along with other excerpted songs from scripture (Exod 15; Deut 32, etc.). What this demonstrates is that within antiquity these passages were read as 'hymns' (in the sense of a song of praise to a god, to be repeated and used for common worship). This point, in conjunction with their deeply psalmic influence, lends credence to the notion that they were *composed* as hymns. At the very least, even if one cannot be certain about the intention of the author in their composition, one can be certain that these passage *became* hymns. This is precisely what is lacking with respect to Phil 2:6–

81 Bockmuehl 1997a: 117.
82 Lincoln 2000: 602.
83 Gordley 2011: 273–274.
84 Käsemann 1960: 34–51.
85 For an account of early debates on this point, see Kümmel 1973: 135–137.

11 and Col 1:15–20.

Of course, one cannot draw strong conclusions from silence. What we are arguing, however, is that it is this silence that needs to be recognized. The default position for analyzing these passages needs to be simply that they are hightened prose as part of a letter. Given that starting point, the burden of proof is on those who wish to argue *for* the Philippian and Colossian passages being hymns. Significantly, the weakness of classical form-critical criteria and silence throughout early Christian reception makes any positive statement about their hymnic status extremely difficult, to say the least. It may be that some subsequent textual discovery will demonstrate conclusively that these passages were used as hymns in antiquity. Until that time, however, we should be content with the descriptor *Christuslob*, a conclusion supported by early Christian reception, and which emphasizes the need to reset how these two pericopes might be understood, read, and interpreted.

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