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Singing to "Lord Jesus Christ": A Prose Hymn and Its Philippian Recipients

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Abstract: Religious audiences frequently hear prose hymns as a part of their ceremonies. The "Lord Jesus Christ" hymn in Philippians 2.6–11 is one such example. The Philippian hymn fits an audience's performance expectations compared to other Greek and Jewish prose hymns and performances. A slave lector likely recited or sang the hymn when delivering the epistle and directly addressed at least four named recipients. This article examines the narrative links between the hymn and the address in 4:1–3. Utilizing performance-critical methods, we explore how this hymn likely functioned for the ancient audience. The reading of the "Lord Jesus Christ" hymn localized the worship of Jesus in Philippi, encouraged financial giving to Paul and Timothy, taught moral lessons, and prepared the audience to address their conflict "in the Lord".

Keywords: performance; narrative; Philippians; hymn; prose hymn; rhetoric

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1. Introduction

The Epistle to the Philippians contains a hymn that was likely known to the recipients before they first heard the epistle delivered in its current epistolary form. Religious ceremonies in the ancient world routinely featured prose hymns such as this one; but few, if any, scholars have examined the connections between the "Lord Jesus Christ" hymn and the named recipients in the epistle. Minear and Gordley discuss the hymn's function in the epistle, and Oestreich discusses the direct address (Minear 1990, p. 214; Oestreich 2016, p. 126; Gordley 2011, p. 378), but only Wright notes the potential connection between the hymn and the recipients (Wright 2017, pp. 166–67).

We can surmise that one reason why most studies of the Philippian hymn overlook the connection between the hymn and the recipients is because of the longstanding debate over the integrity of the epistle (Rahtjen 1960, p. 169; Garland 1985, p. 143). Arguments regarding its separate parts and the thematic links throughout have failed to reach a consensus among scholars. The hymn's origin, authorship, and composition are also matters of great debate because Paul and Timothy likely borrowed familiar lyrics (Schenk 1984, pp. 207, 208; Cullmann 1963, pp. 174–81; Bauckham 1999, p. 61; Bockmuehl 1998, pp. 116–17). This essay does not attempt to resolve these questions, but instead treats the epistle's delivery as a reading event and treats the hymn as a form of media featured in the recitation. How might these named recipients, two of whom are in an unresolved conflict, respond when the reader addresses them directly?

Four, possibly five, recipients are mentioned. They are the beloved brothers and sisters in the colony, including a courier named Epaphroditus; two co-laborers named Euodia and Syntyche; an unnamed *syzygos*, who is the senders' fellow companion; and another co-laborer named Clement. Because the senders were absent, an unnamed lector, possibly Epaphroditus himself, delivered the epistle orally. This essay imagines how the recipients named in the epistle could have responded to the hymn's performance when directly addressed in chapter 4.

To guide this study, we will use the method of performance criticism to examine the hymn and the direct address in 4.1–3. This emerging field of biblical studies pays careful

attention to the delivery of ancient media by examining how texts were read aloud and heard by an audience. This method builds on the work of other disciplines, recognizing that issues related to historical context, authorship, date, setting, gender, orality, and rhetoric inform how an interpreter examines a performance (Rhoads 2006, p. 119). The message from senders to a group of receivers was incomplete in ancient epistolary literature without delivery to a recipient and, in most cases, multiple audiences. There were examples of private readings in personal correspondence. For the most part, however, a public reading to a group was required. The senders or authors were usually absent during the public recitation, and the audiences did not have multiple copies of the text. In light of these issues, Paul's epistles provide a fascinating window into the process of communication, including the role of the courier and the names of people in the audience (Johnson 2017, p. 79; Oestreich 2016, p. 83). Paul's letters contain evidence that they were sent to be read aloud (1 Thess 5.27; Col 4.16; Gal 4.20; 1 Tim 4.13–16; Shiell 2023, p. 796). This essay argues that Philippians would have been delivered similarly to Paul's other epistles. We may not know how the hymn itself was delivered. However, we can reconstruct a hypothetical performance of a prose hymn, like others in the ancient world, and link the hymn to the gathered audience. We will discover that reciting the hymn prepares the listeners to resolve conflict among the co-laborers.

2. Prose Hymns in Antiquity

Before we turn to a discussion of the Philippians, we will survey the conventions of hymns in the ancient world, note a few examples of prose hymns in performance, and explain how prose hymns like Philippians 2.6–11 functioned for their audiences. A hymn was primarily a song for the gods (Plato *Leg* 700b; Menander Rhetor *Hymns to Gods* 1.2.1). They could also praise people and encourage others to do the same. (Pindar *Partheneion* 10–11; Theon *Progymansmata* 9.109). They fell into two categories: third person (*er still*; he or her) addressed about a god directly or second person (*du still* "Thou/You") addressed to a god. Poets and orators composed hymns independently and sang, chanted, or recited them for festivals and religious ceremonies. (Aune 2003, p. 222).

Prose hymns like Philippians 2.6–11 were familiar in the ancient world. They were embedded in narratives, letters, speeches, and apocalypses. Rhetorical schools used them in their curricula to train orators, and poets inscribed them publicly. Plato's *Symposium* (1.2.6) provided the model that the orator Menander followed in the third century C.E. Influenced by Plato, Menander classified seven kinds of hymns: summons, dismissals, philosophical, mythical, fictive, precatory, and deprecatory (*Hymns to Gods* 1.2.6). Closer to the time of Philippians, four prose hymns to Isis dating to the first century B.C.E. were found inscribed on columns in the Egyptian village of Medit Mahdi (Isidoros *Paean* 4.38–40), and Aelius Aristides composed prose hymns in the second century C.E. (Furley and Bremer 2001, p. 49).

First-century C.E. rhetorical schools taught orators the conventions for composition and recitation to gods and humans and treated them as *encomia* (Theon *Progymnasmata* 9.109). There were places marked in the text to pause for the audience to clap (Plato *Laws* 700b). Orators, philosophers, and poets also reinterpreted or applied older hymns in their settings. Quintilian noted the following:

In praising the gods, our first step will be to express our veneration of the majesty of their nature in general terms: next we shall proceed to praise the special power of the individual god and the discoveries whereby he has benefited the human race. . . Even gods may derive honour from their descent, as for instance is the case with the sons of Jupiter, or from their antiquity, as in the case of the children of Chaos, or from their offspring, as in the case of Latona, the mother of Apollo and Diana (*Inst.* 3.7.7–9 [Butler, LCL]).

For example, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus encouraged singing Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus while farming and eating. He wanted to establish an office for someone like himself to sing on others' behalf (Epictetus *Discourses* 1.16.18–21). Seneca quoted the same hymn in his letter on obedience to the universal will and followed Cicero's use of Cleanthes' hymn (Seneca *Ep.* 107.10–12). Likewise, early Christian speakers and audiences recited hymns in

their gatherings (Eph 5.19, Col 3.16; Pliny *Ep.* 10.96). Ignatius repurposed a third-person Greco-Roman star hymn in his epistle to the Ephesians (Ignatius *Ephesians* 19.2–3). Without naming Jesus directly, he celebrates his incarnation as a star shining in heaven with the celestial bodies singing in chorus around the star (Gordley 2011, p. 353).

2.1. Examples of Performances

Greco-Roman performances of poetry and hymns, often used interchangeably, were part of religious festivals. In Apuleius, the performance of a hymn publicly in procession preceded vows to Isis (Apuleius *Met.* 11.9.5). In another example, organizers of the festival to Adonis chose a woman one year in advance to perform a prose hymn to Aphrodite. (Theocritus *Idylls* 10.96–103).

The audience interacted with the performer, and an attendant even requested hymns for someone to sing on their behalf (Asmis 2007, p. 421). For instance, the poet treated Aeneas, possibly a trainer, as a medium to rouse the chorus. The poet says, "You are a faithful herald, a message stick (*skytala*) of the lovely-haired Muses, a sweet mixing-bowl of loud sounding songs" (Pindar *Olympian* 6.89–90; see also Bion *Lament for Adonis* 15). Greek hymns could also be sung as prayers or spoken slowly and deliberately in a conversational tone, either by the performer or the audience, or both (Furley and Bremer 2001, p. 3).

In Hellenistic Judaism, Philo commented on the Theraputae's practices, which were modeled after the singing at the Red Sea. They composed psalms and hymns in various meters and tunes (*V Contempl* 29). Before eating, a solo singer performed a hymn, and the audience was silent. Others followed by singing a hymn that the person composed in order of rank. In the end, everyone sang together (*V Contempl* 79–80). After the feast, they sang together, in various ways, some pre-composed hymns, others that everyone knew, and some antiphonally (*V Contempl* 84; see a similar pattern of solo singing after a meal in Tertullian *Apology* 39).

2.2. Functions of Performances

Prose hymns functioned in five significant ways. Like other hymns in antiquity, prose hymns blessed and praised gods. They also localized a deity in the community where the hymn was performed, taught moral lessons, encouraged financial investment, and demonstrated the god's continual involvement in human relationships.

2.2.1. Devotion to Gods

First, orators performed prose hymns to audiences to express personal gratitude and devotion to gods (Aristophanes *Peace* 947–998). For example, Aristides asked the gods for personal favors. (Aristides *Asclepius* 42.2–3; Parker 2016, p. 68). Praising a god was designed to work in both ways. Hymns pleased the gods, and they reciprocated by showing their pleasure by blessing the speaker and the worshiping community (Epictetus *Discourses* 1.16.18–21; Asmis 2007, p. 421) In Revelation 4–5, the reader described a divine assembly where hymns are sung to God. John had an audition (an auditory vision) and visited a heavenly throne room where hymns are continually sung to God, and the response included weeping, kneeling, and acclamation (Rev 4.8, 11; 5.11–12; 1 Enoch 39.12; 2 Enoch 18.9).

2.2.2. Localize Divine Presence

Second, the performance located the deity in that community. The hymn connected the people to divine work in the past by reinterpreting an older hymn for that location. For instance, Epidaurus inscribed a hymn to Asclepius by the poet Isyllus in the fourth century B.C.E. Isyllus wanted Asclepius to show his pleasure by healing people who worshiped at the site. The hymn established the deity's work in the city. He urged the audience to trust Asclepius for healing in Epidaurus to guarantee that pilgrims would come and worship there (Lozynsky 2014, pp. 145–46).

In the first century B.C.E., three hundred years after Isyllus, Isidoros followed a similar pattern. He localized the worship of Isis in the Egyptian town of Medinet, viewing himself

as a performer and interpreter of ancient Greek traditions to his community (Isidoros *Paean* 4.38–40). He inscribed below each hymn, "Isidoros wrote it". (Lozynsky 2014, pp. 135–36).

Aristides appeared to have similar motivations in Pergamum in the second century C.E. He expressed his gratitude for the sacred wells of Asclepius and described the superior healing power of its waters compared to other sites (Aristides *Regarding the Well in the Temple of Asclepius* 39.2–3, 16–17).

In Jewish and early Christian literature, hymn singing and music located God in the place where they worshiped (2 Chron 5.11–14 LXX; Acts 16.25). By implication, the apocalypse connected the divine assembly noted above to the seven cities addressed in Rev 1.4–3.22.

2.2.3. Economic Investment

The third function, closely associated with location, was economic investment. To further solidify the gods' association with the site and to encourage tourism through pilgrimage, prose hymns encouraged the audience and the region to contribute money for building projects. As Isyllus did for Epidaurus, noted above, local priests and authorities cited the oracle at Delphi and leveraged the message for economic gains for Delphi. They invited other communities to help them complete their project so that more pilgrims would travel to the site. Their generosity to the area contributed to Delphi's and the giver's success. Philodamus invited god's grace and favor on the people and encouraged the people to complete the construction of the temple (Philodamus *Paean to Dionysus* 107–112; Lozynsky 2014, pp. 156–58).

2.2.4. Moral Lessons and Character

Fourth, prose hymns taught moral lessons and shaped character. For instance, a third-person hymn performed at a festival in Sparta began with a moral lesson before the song. Two maidens were chosen for the performance (Alcman *Partheneion* frag. 35–41). The hymn contained a pithy saying called a *gnomai*, followed by the moral lesson, and then the performance itself (Lozynsky 2014, p. 84). Similarly, in the Stoic tradition, reciting Cleanthes' hymn expressed a person's devotion to fate, their willingness to reform their lives, and desire to follow wherever fate led them, even if it led them through suffering (Seneca *Ep.* 107.12–13; Asmis 2007, p. 421).

In early Christian literature, hymn singing fits a pattern of worshiping Jesus as God. For example, Clement of Alexandria invited the congregation to sing a hymn to God as a shepherd so that he will guide them to their eternal home with wisdom for the present (Clement of Alexandria *Pedagogue* 3, lines 1–10; cf. John 1.1–14; Col 1.15–20). Early Christian apocalypses recorded visions of heavenly singing to Jesus (*Ascension of Isaiah* 7.16–17; 8.17–18). Ignatius utilized the star hymn as part of a larger argument to warn the Ephesians against following false teachers who denied Jesus's humanity (Ignatius *Ephesians* 16.1; similarly, *Ephesians* 7.2; *Polycarp* 3.1–2; cf. 1 Tim 3.16; Gordley 2011, p. 378).

2.2.5. Conflict Resolution

Fifth, and most significantly for the hymn in Philippians, prose hymns praised gods for their continued involvement in resolving conflict. The model came from Plato, and Aristides imitated him. In Plato's Symposium, the hymn to Eros described how God reunited people in love. The hymn referred to the myth that Zeus created people by slicing them into different parts from one another. Eros fused lovers who longed to be together and find each other. (Plato *Symposium* 189c–193d; Russell 1990, p. 213.) Similarly, a hymn in Lysistrata ratified a peace treaty between Athens and Sparta and summoned the gods and the people to come out and dance for joy to celebrate the reconciliation between enemies (Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 1262–1294; Furley and Bremer 2001, p. 339).

Imitating Plato, Aristides attributed similar actions to Dionysus. Former enemies came together and were friends again (Aristides 1981, p. 415). He wrote the following:

> Nothing will be so firmly bound, not by disease, not by wrath, or by any fortune, which Dionysus will not be able to set free. But the sick man will be easier and the one-time enemy will be a drinking companion, and the old man will grow young and drink at the urging of the god. (*Oration* 41.8 [Behr])

Dionysus is not the only god who resolved conflicts. Aristides venerated Athena as superior to other gods for her work with people, cities, and relationships. She persuaded people to give up a solitary life and "assemble and dwell together in the compass of a single, common settlement". (37.13). In this prose hymn, he included a rhetorical *sorites*. Each vice or virtue is built on the other, like a stair step. In an oral reading, the audience listened and was linked together by the performance. Listening to the hymn, they would view Athena's work as ongoing in Aristides's home of Baris, where he delivered the speech (Aristides 1981, p. 409). Aristides wrote the following:

> She is the one who wards off our truly universal enemies and sets in order the private war in each of us, since she rids us of our persistent and congenital foes, by which homes and cities are overthrown before the sound of a trumpet, one would say, and she gives each of us a true and proper victory, which is far different from the Cadmean victory and is truly Olympian. Through her agency, folly, wantonness, cowardice, disorder, faction, crime, scorn of the gods, and all such conduct that one could name is banished, and there enters in its place intelligence, moderation, courage, concord, good order, success, and honor of the gods and from the gods. In sum, through Athena's efforts all is an 'Assembly of the gods'. (*Athena* 37.27 [Behr])

Similar effects occurred among Hellenistic Jews and early Christians. Even though evidence of hymn singing in Christian and Jewish gatherings is limited, the examples we have here follow a similar pattern and focus on the connection between the divine and the human (Gordley 2011, p. 273). Hymns united the audience, shaped character, and improved the soul (Philo *Agr*. 80–83; *Spec. Leg*. 1.342–343; *Virt*. 72–75; *V. Mos.* 2.256). Through song, the mind and voice connected to the music of the heavens (*Som*. 1.35, 37) and induced harmony among the audience. For example, in Philo's retelling of the Song of the Sea, he indicated the power of singing in harmony with each other and indicated Moses as the people connected to God (*V. Mos*. 2.256–257; *V. Contempl.* 80–88; Ignatius *Ephesians* 4.2, where singing is a metaphor of harmony in the church and deference to the bishop; Leonhardt 2001, pp. 159, 166).

Following his healing from blindness, Tobit described about his experience. Through an amanuensis, he praised God by combining the Exodus Song of the Sea and Moses' hymn in Deut 31 LXX (Tobit 13.1–8). Tobit praised God for divine kingship and focused on praising God in the present. Gordley wrote that the psalm "paints a grand picture of reality which has the potential to offer hope to an audience in difficult circumstances" (Gordley 2011, p. 216). As Tobit was restored, the book promised that Jerusalem would also be. By recalling the memory of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness, the hymn in Tobit also warns the listeners. What happened to the Israelites could happen to them (Gordley 2011, p. 218).

Early Christians would have known a similar tradition. Hebrews uses Psalm 95 to warn the audience against falling away and encourages them to endure their wilderness experience (Heb 3.7–4.7; Col 1.15–20). In the Gospel of Luke (1.26–38), the evangelist reinterprets Hannah's prayer (1 Sam. 2.1–10 LXX) for Mary's situation. Luke connects Mary to Hannah and shows Mary as an example of obedience to a divine call. She sings a hymn to reflect her devotion to God and God's response to her obedience.

To summarize, prose hymns were performed by a solo orator, artist, or poet or as a community in the ancient world. They anchored communities to the past and brought a god's actions into present circumstances. Through the performances, they incurred favors from a god, localized the deity, expressed their commitment, and expanded the influence of the worship site through finances and travel. Hymns affected their relationships with others because the performance invoked a god's involvement in ratifying peace treaties,

reconciling enemies, and unifying communities. Hellenistic Jews and early Christians adapted these traditions, including the divine assembly. They connected earthly hymn singing and veneration of God to heavenly worship. As the heavenly worshipers sang and bowed to God or Jesus, so did the earthly participants.

3. The Hymn in Performance in Philippians

With this background from the ancient world in mind, we turn to the hymn in the epistle to the Philippians. We will set the historical context for a performance and discuss how such a performance might affect the audience addressed in 4.1–4.

3.1. Worship in Philippi

Even though it is impossible to know how Philippians 2.6–11 was performed in Philippi, we can assume the audience would have recognized 2.6–11 as a prose hymn based on the evidence from the ancient world. They had several options for worship in Philippi and would have likely heard or observed the hymns that were performed. During the time of Paul's visit and the delivery of the letter, locals erected shrines to Diana/Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, and there was an active Isis cult in Philippi (Fiorenza 1975, pp. 36–37). The emperor Claudius deified and venerated Augustus's wife, Livia, in 42 C.E., following her death in 29 C.E. The Romans erected a monument to Livia and four priestesses in the late second century C.E. (Abrahamsen 1995, pp. 79–80).

3.2. Literary and Performance Context of the Hymn

The hymn and direct address in chapter four are linked lexically and thematically by the humble mindset preceding the hymn (1.7; 2.2, 5; 3.15, 19; 4.2, 10) and the memory and veneration of Christ Jesus as Lord within the hymn (1.1; 2.5, 11; 4.1, 2).

Although not directly mentioned in the hymn, the theme of *phronesis* immediately precedes the hymn in 2.5 and provides the context for the attitude and mindset addressed in 4.2, 10. This theme is prominent in Philippians and forms the basis for Paul and Timothy's attitude toward the Philippians (1.7) and their feelings about the senders (4.10). *Phronesis* in 2.2 means communal decisions in an attitude of humility that is analogous to Jesus's mindset and obedience. Rather than thinking solely about private practical decisions, *phronesis* involved working together to make decisions that were grounded in the orientation that Christ Jesus has. As most commentators note, a verb must be supplied in verse 5: "Have this mindset in you which [is] also in Christ Jesus". If we read this hymn similar in the way we read others in the ancient world, it makes sense to view Christ Jesus's activity as ongoing (Bockmuehl 1998, pp. 109, 124). The singing of the hymn engenders the mindset. Jesus's decisions were not just historically in the past; the hymn brought his work into the present through the performance. This mindset helped them accomplish the purpose of the epistle, "standing firm together in the faith, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (1.27; Brawley 2015, p. 241).

The second literary link between the hymn and the direct address is the memory, veneration, and response to Jesus's servitude and exaltation. The greeting (1.1–2) from the slaves of Christ Jesus to the saints in Christ Jesus prepared them for this connection and previewed the choice that Jesus makes in the hymn in 2.7. As mentioned in the introduction, Paul and Timothy co-sent the epistle through a courier named Epaphroditus. Even though Paul and Timothy were physically absent, the letter substituted their presence and served as a "spiritual embodiment" for Paul and Timothy (2 Cor 3.1–3; 1 Thess 1.4–10; 2.1–14a; Holland 2006, p. 16). Epaphroditus himself is an example of the value that Paul and Timothy wanted the Philippians to exhibit. Epaphroditus demonstrated a life of self-sacrifice, placing others' needs above his own. He almost died in the mission (Phil 2.27, 30, Bockmuehl 1998, pp. 173–74). He mediated Jesus's, Paul's, and Timothy's lives in the performance. It is possible that Paul was seeking to avoid a potential conflict over misinformation about Epaphroditus's fate or the financial gift by sending him back quickly to allay these concerns (Phil 2.28; Mayer 1987, p. 188; Buchanan 1964, p. 160; Silva 1988, p. 160). By

welcoming Epaphrodtius, the Philippian church exhibited hospitality, but they were not yet in harmony with one another prior to the letter's delivery. Epaphrodtius's presence brought the Philippians comfort and prepared them to receive Paul and Timothy's challenge favorably (Holloway 2017, p. 144).

Timothy can be viewed as a collaborator with Paul (Pliny *Ep.* 5.3; 3.18.4–10) in its composition and a witness to its content. He validated and confirmed the message (see a similar role of co-senders in Acts 15; 1 Cor 4.17; 5.9–13; Stirewalt 2003, p. 43). They greeted the audience as slaves of Christ Jesus (compare Acts 16.17). Philippians and Romans (1.1) were the only letters where Paul used this title for himself and the only letter where his co-sender was also considered a slave of Christ Jesus. The Greco-Roman view of slavery was well known (Diogenes Laertius *Lives* 122–123; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse* 4.80; 69.2, where enslaved people were considered foolish, weak, and prone to misbehavior; Philo *Spec. Leg.* 2.13.48; 2.39.226–227; *Hyp.* 7.1–9; *Dec.* 165–167). Despite their inferiority, enslaved people were often the media for communication. When the author was absent in household readings, slaves read their messages on their behalf (Quintilian *Inst.* 10.3.18–20; Cicero *Brut.* 22.87; Nepos *Atticus* 25.13–14; Seneca *Ep.* 15.6; Col. 1.7; 4.8–12, where Tychicus, Onesimus, and Epaphras are fellow "slave(s) in the Lord". For a visual analog, see the painting from the house of the tragic poet from Pompeii, contemporaneous with Philippians. An enslaved person in the foreground reads to an audience of six people from an open scroll (Shiell 2004; Ling 1995).

The phrase "saints in Christ Jesus" connected the greeting, hymn, and direct address. The senders used the rhetorical figure *conduplicatio*, repeating "in Christ Jesus" to create a shared identity, and leaving a "deep impression on the hearer" (Cicero *Rhet. Ad.* 4.28.38). The theme "in Christ Jesus" is prominent in Paul's writings and especially this epistle (1.26; 2.5; 3.3, 14; 4.7, 19, 21; Novakovic 2020, p. 2). The phrase "saints in Christ Jesus" is unique in the ancient world but is used twice in Philippians, first in the opening salutation (1.1) and second in the benediction greeting in 4.21, as a greeting from "the brothers and sisters" and "saints" in Caesar's household (4.22). The audience is considered "saints in Christ Jesus". By addressing them this way, Paul and Timothy invoked memories of Daniel 7.7–22, where humans are "holy ones/saints of the Most High". They received an "everlasting kingdom" and constituted a people of the Most High (Dan 7.27).

In summary, the audience would recognize the implications of a prose hymn used in delivering an epistle. Paul and Timothy introduced themselves as enslaved people to communicate through a slave lector about a king who became an enslaved person for the king's saints in that city. The senders humbly submitted to the audience as divinely appointed messengers of the Most High and greeted an intimidated, divided community with grace and peace. The hymn called for these "saints in Christ Jesus" to join with a divine assembly and surrender to an enslaved person named Lord Jesus Christ. They were to work to stand firm in this Lord and work out their differences with each other in this same Lord (4.1–4).

The reaction to this message would likely evoke tears or grief. Two examples from the ancient world and an additional Pauline reference provide parallels. Philostratus indicated that the emperor was moved to tears when he heard Aristides's epistle and its description of Smyrna's destruction (Philostratus *Vitae Sophistatrum* 582). When the King of Israel received a message from a slave, the King of Israel tore his garments in a gesture of grief (4 Kingdoms 5.7 LXX). It was undoubtedly likely that the first impression would not be one of gladness, but closer to awe and wonder. Similarly, Paul's "letter of tears" to the Corinthians would have been delivered with deep emotion and affection for the recipients (2 Cor 10–13; Johnson 2017, p. 67). By doing so, the memory and veneration of Christ Jesus as an enslaved person and Lord set an emotionally moving tone to address the audience in 4.1-4 and exhorted them to stand firm, agree, and rejoice in the Lord.

3.3. A Performance Event in Philippi

Based on readings of epistolary literature and other similar performance events in the ancient world, we can imagine how the epistle to the Philippians would have been delivered orally. Paul typically relied on the letter carrier to communicate messages and embody Paul's presence (2 Cor 7.6–7; Johnson 2017, p. 65). As Glenn Holland notes, "In his letters, he invoked his authority in order to exhort, argue, interpret, and reassure *as if he were present* when the letter was read, that is through the actual performance of his words". (Holland 2006, p. 16). The courier Epaphroditus or a reader mediates the spiritual presence of Paul and Timothy to the Philippians, providing additional comments on the senders' condition and the contents of the epistle (Col 4.7–9). The reader draws the audience together like a "message stick" (Pindar *Olympian* 6.89–90; Ovid *Tristia* 3.4.55–60; *Ex Ponto* 1.8.33–38). The reader also performs the hymn. Like the preparations for the festival to Adonis, the letter suggests that Epaphroditus has been selected ahead of time to be prepared (Theocritus *Idylls* 10.96–103).

This reading could be delivered by one or multiple lectors (Acts 15.30), and the content could be paraphrased and improvised. (Snyder, 156; Jub. 13.10–15; Theon, *Progymnasmata* 66–67; Hermogenes, *Progymnasmata* 4–6; Philostratus *Vitae sophistratum* 582–583). Because of the size of homes, a group of no larger than fifty people gathered in a private setting to listen, likely following a meal. The group functioned like a reading circle similar to the gathering noted above from the house of the tragic poet in Pompeii. They listened, responded, offered feedback, and likely, in the case of the hymn, recited the hymn with the reader (Oakes 2009; Starr 1991; Johnson 2010; Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.11–14; Pliny, *Ep.* 1.9; 3.1.4–5; 34; Nepos, *Atticus* 14.1; Gellius, *Noctes atticae* 2.22.1; Philo, *Somn.* 2.127; *QE* 2.34; 1QS VI, 6–8; CD XIII, 2–4). The event included hymn and psalm recitation (Eph 5.19; Col 3.16), greetings, kissing (Rom 16.16; 1 Cor 16.20; 2 Cor 13.12; 1 Thess 5.26), and instructions to those in the room (Col 4.17; Philm 22; Heil 2011). As noted above, the reaction to the Philippian hymn would likely be sobering rather than exhilarating and set a tone for constructive work among the community.

3.4. Performing Philippians 2:6–11

If we accept that active worship sites, including the one to Isis in Philippi, performed hymns, a local listener would recognize the kind of hymn included in Paul and Timothy's epistle as a prose hymn to Lord Jesus Christ. Based on Menander's system, the melody in Philippians is a third-person mythical hymn. The hymn was an encomium to Lord Jesus Christ, designed for "beauty and dignity not archaic and grandiose words, but harmonious arrangement and figures of style" (*Hymns to Gods* 1.2.4; 1.6.6).

The beginning of the hymn is marked by a relative particle *hos* in verse 6 and ends in verse 11 before the transitional particle *hŌste* (2.12). The center of the hymn is the focus, in which the phrase "death on the cross" is repeated. Gordley notes that the hymn does not conform to any Greek metrical pattern and should be considered "rhythmic prose" (Gordley 2011, p. 277). As such, we can render the hymn to emphasize the descent of Jesus as a servant, followed by God's and the people's response.

Who in form of God being
Not take advantage of consider to be with God
But himself emptied
A form of a slave taking
In likeness of humanity becoming
And in appearance being born as humans
He humiliated himself
Being born obedient unto death

DEATH ON A CROSS

Therefore also God him exalted
And gave him the name

Above every name
So that at the name of Jesus
Every knee would bow
Of things in heaven and earth and under the earth
and every tongue confess that
Lord Jesus Christ
To glory of God Father

Just as Moses assembled a divine assembly from earth and heaven to hear his hymn (Deut 31 LXX; *Virt.* 73–79), now the Philippian "saints" gather "of things in heaven and earth and under the earth". As noted above, the reader is the "message stick" in Philippi, rousing the Philippians like a chorus to participate in five ways (Pindar *Olympian* 6.89–90): to bless and praise God, locate the worship of Lord Jesus Christ in the community of Philippi, encourage giving from the Philippians, teach a moral lesson by warning the audience of the consequences of ongoing conflict, and assist the audience in conflict resolution.

3.4.1. Bless and Praise Lord Jesus Christ as God

First, the prose hymn blesses and praises Lord Jesus Christ as God for his obedient servitude, reminding the audience of what they already believed and presumably have sung before (Gordley 2011, p. 277). Like Epictetus (*Discourses* 1.16.18–21), Paul and Timothy reuse a known hymn, bless God for his providential work, and express gratitude to God. Like the writer of Tobit and the Gospel of Luke, Paul and Timothy praise God and the people. Performing the hymn tunes the congregation to a new mindset that Paul describes in 2.5 (Minear 1990, p. 214). They invite the citizens to recite a hymn together, recount certain deeds of Jesus, and honor God.

The focus is primarily on the humble obedience of the divine figure, especially his death (Isaiah 53.1–12 LXX). Structurally, the hymn descends to the nadir of "death on a cross". Jesus dies a scandalous death reserved only for non-Roman citizens, a shocking ending for Romans and Jews (Deut. 21.23; Cicero *Pro Rabirio* 5.10; *Verr*. 5.66): "Christ's death by crucifixion was the ultimate in human degradation". The poem's structure emphasizes this manner of death and evokes a dramatic reaction. The phrase "even death on a cross" is the climax of the hymn, a rhetorical figure used to give "repeated outbursts of emotion". (Quintilian *Inst. Or.* 9.3.43, 44, 54–55). As Bockmuehl notes, "It has the effect of an arresting musical syncopation, marking the end of the downward narrative but leaving one on the edge of one's seat for what comes next" (Bockmuehl 1998, p. 139).

Like other Jewish and Greek hymns, there is a divine response. God does not allow for this shameful but voluntary death to be the conclusion. Just as Jesus chooses to humiliate himself, God vindicates Jesus by "super-exalting" him to a high position (2.9; Bird and Gupta 2020, p. 84). This word, *hyperypsōsen*, used only here in the New Testament, echoes a similar expression for worshiping God in Psalm 96:9 LXX. God exalts the one who did not exploit his status (Psalm 96.9 LXX; Thompson and Longenecker 2016, p. 72). Like the suffering servant in Isaiah 52.12–13, God vindicates Jesus's humiliating death. Jesus's voluntary suffering qualifies him to exercise authority over everything (Bauckham 1999, p. 58). Although Paul asserts the power of the resurrection in other epistles, here, the mention of the resurrection is absent. Instead, they learn the significance of God's action to vindicate Jesus for obedience amidst unjust suffering (Bockmuehl 1998, p. 141).

God also graces Jesus with a name that is familiar to Jews. The verb *eucharisato*, a form of "grace," signifies that Jesus's status is not a reward for his suffering, but a mutual gift between God and Jesus (Migliore 2014, p. 93). God grants Jesus the "name above every names" (YHWH), the same name for God in Isaiah 45.22–23, which is the only God to whom all shall bow (see also Psalm 99.3; Deut 28.58; Neh 9.5; and Bauckham 1999, p. 58). The Philippians may have heard a similar statement about Isis as the lord (*kyria*) above all gods (Isidoros *Paean* 4.8–10; Fiorenza 1975, pp. 36–37). The hymn venerates Jesus as the God of the first commandment before whom the citizens of Philippi should have no other gods. The hymn shifts the audience's understanding of who can be a "lord".

3.4.2. Locate Worship of Lord Jesus Christ in Philippi

Secondly, the hymn locates this worship in Philippi. The performance of the hymn as part of an epistle addressed to the "saints in Christ Jesus" in Philippi anticipates a response now in the community and the future by all creation. When his name is announced, they surrender and confess, embodied in kneeling and speech. The aorist subjunctive of *kampsē* and *exomologēsētai* indicates that the gesture of kneeling and the confession of the name have already begun. Paul and Timothy may have been looking to the future, but Jesus's death begins the invitation to surrender. The Philippians and the cosmos participate in what will one day be universal. The hymn presupposes that just as the Philippians show homage now, all creation is doing so and will do so in the future, including heavenly beings, earthly creatures, and even the dead, presumably because they will be resurrected (Rev. 5.13; Fee 1995, p. 224).

This performance transforms the Philippian mindset about voluntary humiliation and worship of Jesus as God. The humiliating death and exaltation of Jesus change the audience in ways that are foreign to the ancient world. Such a transformational act of sacrifice changes how people relate to this God and each other. The audience hears that "only the Servant can also be the Lord" (Bauckham 1999, p. 61).

Just as every knee bows, every tongue means that each person will acknowledge openly or declare who the Lord is (2.11; 4.1, 2, 4; Fee 1995, p. 225). "Lord Jesus Christ" is the literal order of the confession in this hymn, emphasizing *Lord* in the first position. The politically and theologically loaded term signals a public declaration of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ rather than the local Roman authorities or other gods. Jesus is elevated above the cosmic powers, and only in Philippians does the New Testament indicate that everyone who worships Jesus will call him Lord (Thompson and Longenecker 2016, p. 73).

3.4.3. Financial Giving

Because Lord Jesus Christ is worshiped in Philippi, the hymn singing enables the third function: thanking the Philippians for their financial gift and inviting them to contribute more to Paul and Timothy's mission (4.15–20). Unlike Delphi, the construction of a temple for pilgrimage is not a concern in Philippi (Philodamus *Paean to Dionysus* 107–112). Paul and Timothy are focused on finances for their mission. The hymn functions more like Aristides's praise to Asclepius for his power through the sacred wells in Pergamum (Aristides *Regarding the Well in the Temple of Asclepius* 39.2–3, 16–17). The senders use the hymn to thank the audience and encourage ongoing work in that place and elsewhere. They assure them that the Lord Jesus Christ's work is present in their community, express gratitude for their gift, and assure them of God's continued favor because of their financial commitment (4.15–20).

The administration of this financial gift and the attending Issues are tied to the "overseers," addressed in the greeting (1.1), who are likely Euodia and Syntyche (4.1–3). In the ancient world, overseers, who functioned as guardians of the agreements between the gods and the people (Plutarch *De Camillo* 5; Josephus *Wars* 4.543), were sent after a colony was established to help constitute and organize the community and ensure that the laws and processes were put in place (Aristophanes *Birds* 1022–1054). Plato preferred women as overseers to young married people (*Leg.* 2.784a). They were caretakers and watchers to ensure that the community was protected (Josephus *Ant.* 10.4.1), they were inspectors on God's or others' behalf (Philo *De Migratione Abraham* 24), and they were money managers to ensure that funds were distributed correctly (4 Kingdoms 12.11 LXX; 2 Chron 34.12, 17; Porter 1939, pp. 105–12). Based on the preceding evidence, we can reasonably assume that these overseers administered the funds that the Philippians sent to Paul and Timothy through Epaphroditus. The hymn's performance aligned well with the audience's expectations of generosity toward God and the co-senders.

3.4.4. Moral Lessons

The fourth function is to teach two moral lessons: one is about the kind of obedience that is necessary for life in the colony, and the other is an implied warning about the dangers of disobedience. As noted before, just as Tobit achieved through his amanuensis, Paul and Timothy repurposed an existing song for a new context (Tobit 12.20). Tobit praised God to inspire the people to greater devotion. The Philippians 2 hymn achieves something similar by using a rhetorical figure of *ekphrasis*, a description envisioning an obedient humble lifestyle that is necessary for the Philippians as saints of the Lord Jesus Christ. The visualizations of Jesus's descent and "death on a cross" and Paul's imprisonment produce vividness with emotional excitement/*pathos* because the images correspond to what is practical or truthful about their circumstances (Aristotle *Rhet.* 3.11.1411b.20). Ancient orators and novelists used these emotions to change an audience, help them refocus their lives toward the good, and connect (Ovid *Tristia* 3.4.55–60; *Ex Ponto* 1.8.33–38; Webb 1997, p. 117). A listener has faith or belief (*pisteis*) in a person to emulate because they hear about the virtues that are honored in the community and can be shared with their neighbors and benefit others (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.11.4; Shiell 2011, p. 14).

The prose hymn and the epistle help the audience visualize and reorient their mindset about Jesus's humiliating choices, his manner of death, the attending responses to Jesus, and Paul's condition in prison. Jesus's and Paul's circumstances are not shameful, but virtuous, obedient lives worth exalting. Jesus's circumstances function as an analogy to the Philippians' situation. Even though they will likely not face crucifixion, the imagery of "rebirth" or "becoming" obedient suggests a path that the citizens of Philippi can choose to follow. In 2.7–8, the participle *genomenos* is repeated, once referring to humanity, and once referring to obedience. If the Philippians are willing to adopt this mindset, their obedience will lead to a rebirth (2.12–15).

This *ekphrasis* also warns the audience. If they stand firm together, they can avoid losing their colony. Like the prose hymn of Moses (Deut 31 LXX), the audience is on notice. Anyone who aligns themselves with the "dogs" (3.1–4) or divides the group will suffer the same consequences as the Israelites entering the promised land.

3.4.5. Resolve Conflict in the Lord

Lastly, the hymn's performance in Philippians sets the stage for the direct address in chapter 4. The hymn is not a detached refrain, but a medium to resolve the present conflict "in the Lord" (Gordley 2011, p. 285). Paul and Timothy list three activities "in the Lord," connecting ("so that") their practical work to the hymn's confession to "Lord Jesus Christ": standing firm (4.1), agreeing (*phronein*) (4.2), and rejoicing (4.4). Each phrase is mentioned as the lector directly addresses the audience of beloved brothers and sisters and names three people: two overseers, Euodia and Syntyche, and Paul's anonymous genuine companion (*syzygos* Oestreich 2016, p. 87). Considering what we have learned about hymn singing and conflicts, this audience could easily connect the hymn to the issues in 4.1–3.

To stand firm in the Lord, the reader directly addresses the "brothers and sisters" (vocative) first. The rhetorical effect binds the siblings to the words and each other (4 Macc 13.19–27) and causes the audience to submit to the senders' wishes (Longinus (*Subl.*) 1.4). As Longinus notes, the use of multiple figures at once "often has an exceptionally powerful effect, when two or three combined to cooperate, as it were, to contribute force, conviction, beauty". (Longinus (*Subl.*) 20.1 (Russell, LCL)). They are invited into the struggle to maintain virtuous living while dealing with the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche (Longinus (*Subl.*) 26.1–2; Shiell 2011, p. 50). The words are not only linked together rhetorically, but the rhetorical effect of the reading also links the senders and listeners together. Everyone is involved in the process, whether or not they want to be. Verse 1 uses repetition to heighten the emotional intensity by addressing the audience twice as "beloved" (Symon 2007, p. 230). The people are Paul's and Timothy's joy, completed through the people's harmonious relationships (Matt 25.23). But their joy is incomplete (2.2) because they do not share the same mindset (2.3, 4.2). By thinking together (2.2) in the

Lord, they complete Paul's joy (4.1, 4). The performance tunes their ears to achieve what Paul and Timothy want in 1.27—strengthen cohesion in the Lord (Oestreich 2016, p. 126).

Verse 2 addresses three individuals to "agree in the Lord". Euodia and Syntyche are likely two "bishops/overseers" addressed in 1.1 who, like Lydia in Act 16, host the church and administer the financial resources given (Osiek 2000, p. 112). Their "struggle along with Paul" indicates their prominence and roles in constituting and organizing the colony and administering finances (Plato *Leg*. 2.784a). They ensure that monetary resources are distributed correctly, and they watch over and guard the new community (Phil 1.27; 3.1, 4.10–18). By listening to or singing the hymn, they are prepared for Paul and Timothy to address them directly in the reading of Philippians.

The direct address can be interpreted in two ways: a foundational admonition to the colonists to resolve the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche or an aside to the prominent women before the remaining instructions unfold. The reader decides the emphasis.

In the first interpretation, Euodia and Syntyche's unresolved conflict affects everything in the community. Now that the group has sung together as citizens of heaven, the following verses explain how they stand firm in this way. The reader could emphasize the phrase this way, "So that the siblings can stand firm, I need these two people to be single-minded. The church's unity depends on their peace". The alternative interpretation views the conflict as one—but not the primary issue—in the church. The emphasis here is "Therefore, I admonish you to stand firm in this way. Resolve your conflict. Everyone else, rejoice in the Lord".

By singling out these persons, the reader addresses and names the people that are necessary to unify the church and keep them together during suffering. This scene is an example of a first-century intervention. We should imagine a reader looking directly into their eyes and personally pleading with people in the room with the first-person singular "I appeal" (4.2), repeated like "beloved" in 4.1 for emotional intensity. The reader defuses tension publicly by facing the women, praising them, and appointing a fellow companion: "Yes-- I ask also you, genuine fellow companion, intervene with them" (4.3). The word "yes" indicates that the recipient of the request is expected to say "yes". The companion does not have an option. The work of intervention is not merely "helping" these women, which most English versions have. This word is usually used in the New Testament to "arrest," "seize," or "conceive". Here, Paul and Timothy want intense assistance, much like the disciples dragging in the catch of fish in Luke 5.7–9 (Thompson and Longenecker 2016, p. 123). In other words, this is a gesture to "take hold" of these leaders to try to help them get along for the sake of the colony. The companion can work with the beloved siblings to address the rift and hold the parties accountable. By structuring the presentation in this way, Paul and Timothy put public pressure on the group to figure out how to get along and put pressure on the church to participate in the reconciliation process.

The third activity is the repeated "rejoice in the Lord", emphasizing joy's role in the intervention (3.1, 4.4). Instead of turning to the past and reminding them of the wrongs that Euodia and Syntyche committed, the epistle reminds them of Lord Jesus Christ's present work through the hymn and turns their attention to a future that is focused on the joy that is found in restored relationships. They foster recognizable gentleness, believing that the Lord is near. Just as Jesus's presence is wherever "two or three" are gathered to resolve a church conflict, his presence is with the Philippians in their joyful gentleness toward each other (Matthew 18:15–20).

Their decision to engage in these ways enables a divine work similar to the Greek prose hymn tradition. The Lord Jesus Christ becomes an Eros and Dinoysus-like figure, reuniting people in love and unity (Plato *Symposium* 189c–193d; Aristides *Oration* 41.8). Like Athena, he brings peace to a divided community and trains people to live morally (Aristides *Oration* 37.13). The performance suggests that this decision to confess to the Lord Jesus Christ in chapter two begins to harmonize the relationships, making it possible for these three actions (stand firm, agree, rejoice) to occur.

To reinforce their thinking, in 4.8–9, Paul and Timothy use a combination of rhetorical figures: *sorites*, a stair step or ladder effect; *gradatio*, or a chain link effect; and *asyndeton*, the repeated use of whatsoever (see the impact in Longinus above). They set up two *sorites*, a virtuous and praiseworthy stair-step process, similar to Aristides' hymn to Athena (*Oration* 37.27). The reading creates a chain link effect or *gradatio* among the concepts and the people with the *asyndeton* "whatsoever". One concept builds upon the other.

In this context, Paul and Timothy use the performance of the hymn and the subsequent address to develop a virtuous and praiseworthy mindset and a practical way to put these thoughts into action (Phil *Sacrif. Abel.* 27; Phil *Leg. Alleg.* 1.64; Cicero *Rosc. Amer.* 27.75; Dio Chrysostom *Disc.* 4.89–90; 69.1–3; Wis. 8.7; 1QS 4.2–6). Just as God responded to Jesus's humiliation (2:6–11), now, God responds to the Philippians' work "in the Lord" and establishes peace as a guardian and a governor (4.9; Novakovic 2020, p. 109). The hymn becomes a rhetorical tuning fork, identifying the dissonance in the audience and preparing them to be brought into harmony with one another. Singing together, they reunite a divided church and express their commitment to standing firm in one Spirit (Minear 1990, p. 204). God's peace keeps watch over the colony as they feel, think, and discern together as they intervene, pray, and offer thanksgiving (Osiek 2000, p. 116). This kind of prayer does not lead to more worry; it leads to confidence. The audience surrenders to Christ's peace, and God's protection gives them peace. This peace is closely attached to singing amid suffering (2.6–11). Just as the joy of the Lord is a safeguard (3.1), joy, singing, and peace are also connected (Acts 16.25). The chanted hymn in Philippians 2, the intervention in chapter four, and the actions "in the Lord" activate the peace of God to guard the community (Bowens 2020, p. 260).

4. Conclusions

Ancient authors and orators communicated through prose hymns, and religious audiences routinely participated in their performances. The epistle to the Philippians contains one such example of a prose hymn that is utilized similarly to other Greek and Jewish hymns. The "Lord Jesus Christ" hymn venerates Jesus for his obedience and the manner of his death. Paul and Timothy utilize a solemn and emotionally moving performance of the hymn through Epaphroditus or a lector to encourage reconciliation, indirectly warn them of the consequences of fragmentation in the community, address the conflict between two prominent women in the epistle, and encourage continued philanthropy from the audience. The hymn values what the ancient world would have considered shameful actions and honors Jesus's sacrifice as a model for virtuous living. Unique among ancient authors, Paul and Timothy utilize the hymn to name the persons in conflict and authorize other recipients to mediate. The performance of the hymn with the direct address illustrates how the audience perceived Jesus's ongoing work in the community and the hymn's role in reconciling fragmented relationships. The singing to "Lord Jesus Christ" fosters a new mindset of humility toward one another. The performance helps the audience recall the biographies of Jesus, Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus, linking them together. The Philippians have the confidence to stand firm in the Lord together (4:1) in this life and in the next (1.6; 2.1; 3.3, 10–11, 21; 4.7, 19).

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