

# Hymning the Faith for harmony: Philippians 2.6-11

(This Thinksheet is preparation for my presentation, to our Theology Studygroup, of Paul S. Minear's last chapter ["The Hymn: Philippians"] in THE BIBLE AND THE HISTORIAN: Breaking the Silence About God in Biblical Studies [Abingdom/02].)

1 If he'd had & used King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" as his title-model, Paul would have titled this letter not (as in the Greek NT) "To Philippians" but "Letter from an Ephesian Jail." He was in & out of jail numerous times during his three-year residence in that city (a longer residence than anywhere else since he left Tarsus, his native city). More than any other city he preached in, Ephesus is about as it was in his time (the mosquitos having eliminated the human population almost 17 centuries ago). As Loree & I walked around Ephesus three springs ago, I wanted to see his prison: we walked where he walked when we were in the agora (market-place), amphitheater, & public toilets (long marble slabs with holes, no privacy, continuous music to avoid the embarrassment of noisy flatus); we were assured that a certain commercial stall was where Paul made tents & awnings; but the site of the dungeon-jail is unknown (yet how I'd like to sit just where he wrote his prison-letter of **joy in suffering!**).

2 The situation Paul's addressing is twofold: an authority struggle between him & certain Judaizers whose male-dominance gene was challenging his supervision of the Christians in Philippi (whether in one or more congregations), & the resultant unrest--community chaos--where the peace of Christ through the "mind" (2.5) of Christ should reign.

3 The verses immediately following (viz., 2.6-11) are a hymn (possibly known to the Philippian Christians) specifying what this "mind" (curative of inflated ambition & resultant strife) is: it is the mind (to stay with psychobiology) not of the dominant but of the submissive gene, the mind of deliberate **humility**.

4 Hymns? Their presence in early-Christian worship is evidenced not only in their literature but also in extant nonChristian writings--beginning with Pliny to Trajan, AD 117 CE (the Roman governor of Bythinia [east of Ephesus] asking the emperor what to do about Christians & their accusatory neighbors). Pliny's letter is, additionally, the first nonChristian reference to Christian worship: Christians gather at sun-up Sundays & "sing hymns to Christ as to a god"\* (early: no day of the week was a day off from work).

5 To Pliny, hymn-singing (& other verified Christian activities) did not seem to warrant capital punishment, but the governor is asking the emperor whether he should kill off the Christians as irritants to the public calm (a sentence for which, in the empire, there was legal precedent). Those early Christians, before Constantine, were never free from the threat of death, which (this hymn says) "Christ Jesus" (2.5) suffered (2.8) & Paul was in daily danger of suffering. Minear 256: "Lohmeyer was convinced that the central problem in this letter was the threat of **martyrdom** [my boldface] to both apostle and church....later scholarship would have profited greatly if it had taken more seriously his emphasis on persecution as a central key to understanding the apostle's thought. To have preserved that key would have inhibited the tendencies toward euphemistic perversions that have plagued interpretations of this letter. Paul's commands have been trivialized into moral attributes that are highly honored in conventional middle-class behavior. As a result, the command to rejoice has become virtually meaningless. Nothing so quickly insulates a reader from the steel-tough logic of this appeal from an Ephesian jail. Nothing so quickly reduces the range and power of the hymn."

6 Minear's last ¶ (257) centers on the question how Christians are to react to the threat of martyrdom. In "radical obedience [my underlining] to the martyr Messiah as the litmus test of discipleship," we are to use (as the hymn tells us to) the Crucified as model--the death-threat reacted to not with "fear, caution and dread" but with "courage, firmness and joy"--Paul's reactions, "And the singing of the hymn in Philippi would have encouraged the reactions Paul favored." "Therefore" (2.9,12) shows the tight tie-in between the hymn & the letter. Messiah's martyrdom models both for attitude & for mission-strategy.

\* Pliny, Epistle 10.97: "Christo quasi Deo [or 'deo']".

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\* Proximate choice, ultimate coercion ("make subject"). This & some other Pauline passages eliminate the possibility of a weak reading of "should" (as duty but not necessity) in 2.10,11 (on which E.F.Scott [IB.11.1955] says "all will submit to him because they cannot do otherwise"). I conclude to translate "every knee must bow...and every tongue must confess..." (Only New American Bible has "must.")

7 Was "Philippians" successful? Early Christianity did succeed in fighting off both the tendency to slide back into tribalism (the Judaizing temptation) & to float up off the ground & out of history into gnosticism (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas). As fighter against both temptations, Paul can say to the Philippians "you have always obeyed me" (2.12)--but the martyr-Messiah model is not of dominance but of submission; so Paul's Judaizing rival leaders among the Philippian Christians are to take direction in humility, not submit to repression. The male-dominance gene, when frustrated, need not lead to withdrawal & depression & disease (pathologies spelled out in the current Newsweek as evidenced in American males today) but may find vigorous expression in "courage, firmness and joy."

8 While Minear, in this essay, deals with the Phil.2 hymn's structure & function, he brackets its doctrinal content--the 6th & last of his "preliminary theses" (248): "This Passion chorale, like many other early hymns, had a confessional component. It voiced a prophetic disclosure ("Therefore God also highly exalted") and a communal response ("confess that Jesus Christ is Lord"). This creedal role was clearly vital; yet, interpreters should not mistake the hymn for carefully formulated doctrine or for a test of faith. The hymn has often been distorted by an overemphasis on dogmatic substance; music is not the place to look for theological precision. So, too, early Christian hymns often fulfilled historical functions by epitomizing the story of Jesus....[this] hymn was designed to exert moral pressure on the singers....to shape the 'mind' of the congregation and to clarify its vocation. ...By singing it the congregation affirmed a hidden conjunction between God's exaltation of Jesus and God's design for all things. Interpreters must seek to do justice to its multiple motifs: confessional, historical, moral, liturgical, and existential. Like all authentic music, the hymn encouraged participation at a level beyond the reach of analysis, where the 'mind' of Philippian saints was being shaped."

Minear does not explain his cautions against some interpreters' "overemphasis on [this hymn's] dogmatic substance": as a Christian scholar, does he not (e.g.) believe in Jesus Christ's pre-existence & that every knee is to bow to him / every tongue confess him Lord (2.10,11--the two verbs, aorist subjunctive, usu. trd. "should" [as in all Englishings through 1960 with the exception of Rheims (1582), which has "knee bowe" & "tongue confesse"]; so Moff., AT, JB/NJB, NRSV, NIV, NEB/REB; Amplified has "should (must)"--inclusive of duty & coercion; some (TEV, CEV, Peterson's TM, NLT, NEB) have "will"--future actuality, as in the "shall" of Phillips, LNT, & the Amplified fn. ["implying authority or compulsion," as in NAB's "must"). What for me weighs against "should" as optional (i.e., duty without compulsion) is the the OT source (Is.45.23, signaled by the boldface, in the Bible Societies' Greek NT of Phil.2.10,11; vv.22-23 thus translated in TANAKH: "I am God, and there is none else....To Me every knee shall bow / Every tongue swear loyalty" (my underlining; on these two verses, the HarperCollins' Study Bible says "The pagans are invited to acknowledge God and be saved"). Further, after quoting the Is. passage (as "shall" in NRSV, the Greek verbs being not aorist subjunctive but future indicative), Paul says (Ro.14.12 NRSV), "So then, each of us will [my underlining] be accountable to God." Important? I sent my "Muhammad Bows to Jesus" (Thinksheet #3117) to a number of Muslims; Muhammad not only should, but will!

Is this universalist, ultimately all bowing-worshiping Jesus? No. Biblical "bowing" is either political (of the defeated, before the victor) or religious (of the devout, before the deity).

9 The poem's balanced structure reveals that the way up (victory, resurrection, glory; the 2nd stanza) follows (cannot occur without) the way down (kenosis [self-emptying], humility, obedience "to the point of death"; the 1st stanza). Paul's opponents wrongly imagine they can achieve status/authority/power by "seizing" it (vs.6; as Jesus did not, & Paul does not): God "gives" it (vs.9; here, to [p.251] "the slave Lord"). Rival leaders (1.15) were enemies of the cross, which divides both the hymn (into two stanzas/strophes) & time (into two ages) (3.18-21: "enemies of the cross....their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven," & the Savior "will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself"\*).

\* The Vulgate has the same problem (though the Latin is present subjunctive): "should" (the usual auxiliary to designate the subjunctive) has meanings in addition to necessity, which clearly is Paul's meaning; dropping the auxiliary eliminates the problem. But the subjunctive has these advantages here: no time element, in lieu of imperative, & iterative punctiliar. No history-of-interpretation support for any non-necessity meaning of the subjunctives in Phil.2.10,11.