

Matthew E. GORDLEY, *New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance*. Downers Grove IL, Inter Varsity Press, 2018, 15,2 × 22,8 cm, 263 p., ISBN 978-0-8308-8002-7

John S. Adimula

Volume 73, Number 1-2, January–August 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075415ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075415ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Collège universitaire dominicain, Ottawa

ISSN

0316-5345 (print)

2562-9905 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Adimula, J. S. (2021). Review of [Matthew E. GORDLEY, *New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance*. Downers Grove IL, Inter Varsity Press, 2018, 15,2 × 22,8 cm, 263 p., ISBN 978-0-8308-8002-7]. *Science et Esprit*, 73(1-2), 289–293. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075415ar>

Conclusion

When one finishes reading the book a mix of flavors remains in one's mouth.

First, a bitter taste. 1) The book is sometimes repetitive in its presentations. Some of the summaries of the content could be abbreviated. 2) The book is also disproportionate. The greater part of each chapter is spent making the presentation of the topic and then, in the last three or four pages of each chapter, he presents the Roman political reading of one particular scene. The only exception is Chapter IV which, I think, is the most interesting one. 3) Some of Winn's proposals are well presented, but they need to be demonstrated. When you finish the book you are left with a sweet taste in your mouth.

When finishing the book, one is left with a sweet taste in one's mouth: one learns several things through it, it is an easy book to read, the author has good rhetorical abilities to keep the reader interested and one gets some insights for research. Winn's books is neither a waste of time nor of money.

José Rafael REYES GONZÁLEZ, O.P.

Études doctorales

École biblique et archéologique française

Jérusalem

Matthew E. GORDLEY, **New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance**. Downers Grove IL, Inter Varsity Press, 2018, 15,2 × 22,8 cm, 263 p., ISBN 978-0-8308-8002-7.

The book has six chapters devoted to the investigation of Christological hymns in the New Testament. From the first to the second chapters, the author spells out the area of concern of his investigation and explores the background, cultures and traditions of hymnody that might have had an influence on the New Testament hymns. His concern is not to argue for the identification of pre-existing materials in the New Testament hymns, but to recognize hymnic features in some of the passages suspected to be Christological hymns. At the beginning, he notes this challenge: the difficulty of identifying and taking for granted these two distinct issues, i.e. hymnic features in a passage and the identification of pre-existing materials as being linked to the hymnic features.

Matthew Gordley (MG) notes the efforts of scholarship that have challenged the presence of pre-existing formula or materials in the Christological hymns in the New Testament, explaining that the features that have been identified as criteria for detecting pre-existing materials are speculative, hence, the methodology used is problematic. He seems to accept this position even though he is not laudable in his expression, but holds that the presence of these features do "not necessarily lead to the conclusion that these texts were pre-existing materials" (p. 219). These features or criteria include introductory formula, special beginning, contextual dislocations, uniqueness of language, stylistic abnormalities, special beginning, participles and relative clauses, multiple attestations, etc. The New Testament hymns, as presented in the passages where they are found, are sometimes not complete but fragments and references in which only a part seems to be represented.

By identifying some criteria which are very unique in some of the texts, one cannot but be struck by the distinctiveness of the passage in question and from there call for an investigation of the origin of the material in the passage. Although it may appear speculative when one considers only a few of such features within a text and makes such a conclusion, an adequate concentration of these criteria within a passage is a great indication of the presence of pre-existing material. If one is to insist that the effort is speculative in this regard, then it poses the risk of seeing almost all the scholars' endeavors as speculative just because one does not find explicit evidence of some realities.

The shortcoming on the part of the critics is that they do not consider the criteria as a whole but choose some and argue only for them. A scholar like Fowl Stephen, for example, dwells on two criteria, namely, uniqueness of vocabulary and evidence of redaction based on stylistic abnormalities. Other critics include Ralph Brucker, Peppard Michael. But when these criteria are objectively and broadly considered within a text, one must be confronted with a question: how does one explain this unique difference within the context of the passage? The high concentration of these features and the presence of the criterion of multiple attestations within the New Testament writings is a high sign of the presence of pre-existing material. MG does not explicitly show that this could make a passage representing pre-existing material, he is prudent by admitting that the high concentration of these features "that are also shared by a selection of texts across the spectrum of New Testament writings" could make one say that Phil 2, Col 1 and John 1 "were written in such a way that they draw on specific kinds of traditional material" (p. 31). It is obvious that he limited his expression to the three passages he is concerned with. With special attention to the features that make the passages (under exploration) hymnic, the author is more convinced especially when they are viewed in light of the conventions of ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman hymnody.

Special emphasis is placed on three major New Testament Christological hymns, namely, Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20 and the prologue of John's Gospel (1:1-18). After an expansive discussion on these three, the author in chapter six takes up other New Testament passages (Eph 2:14-16; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 1:1-4; 1 Pet 3:18-22; Lukan hymns: infancy narrative, Lk 1:46-55 [Magnificat], 1:68-79 [Benedictus], 2:14 [Gloria in excelsis], 2:29-32 [Nunc Dimittis]; and hymns in Revelation 4-5). He recognizes that scholarly studies of these hymns have been based extensively on the individual passages, which in themselves are praiseworthy. His aim is to provide a current monograph that takes care of both the discussion of the individual hymn and an overall synthesis of the phenomenon of early Christian hymns as a whole. This he aims to do in the light of current research and advances in the field of biblical studies.

In his analysis of these hymns, he provides a comparative analysis with respect to their culture, literary and theological contexts, while noting the continuities and innovations brought about. He is consistent in situating this analysis within the cultural matrices of Greco-Roman hymnody and early Jewish worship with specificity on the Second Temple period. Here, he discusses hymns in their rhetoric, style and content, and collections of hymns preserved from the ancient world. This shows that the practice of hymns was widespread in antiquity. Hymns were used in the praise of the divine (gods or divinized rulers) by poets and hymnographers. They

had the role of bringing their audience into an encounter with ultimate reality. They help to shape the hearers and community's worldview. In their hymns of praise, the early Christians align with these practices of antiquity, but at the same time diverge from them. The New Testament hymns show that Jesus is praised for his divine origin, exceptional accomplishments and divine honors, while also providing a kind of resistance to the Roman imperial ideology and meet the needs of the present community. He opines that it is necessary to understand the broad ancient category of hymn which includes prose and poetry, freestanding song and literary praise of gods so as to be able to recognize New Testament hymns and to avoid dismissing them that they do not fit a particular aspect of ancient conceptions of hymnody.

After examining the background and the key features of the ancient context of early Christian worship, the author takes up the analysis of the New Testament hymns beginning with the first three major ones: Phil 2, Col 1 and John 1. The Philippian hymn presents Jesus' humiliation and exaltation in a rich manner which has caught the attention of scholars. MG notes some general features about this hymn that: 1) it is constructed in Jewish psalm style, 2) it is imbedded with some key Jewish and Greco-Roman motifs, 3) the story is about Jesus, and 4) it is directed to a community that seeks for an identity in the midst of the challenges in their environment. Before delving into the analysis of the hymn, the author exposes its scholarship which touches on the exegesis of key phrases and terms, origin, authorship, structure, significance within the letter, its background, social context and theological analysis. He identifies three major scholars in the discussion of the development of this hymn: Ernst Lohmeyer, Ernst Käsemann and Ralph Martin. Among other things they did were to provide an arrangement of the hymn in strophes, argue for its pre-Pauline material, its redaction particularly with the phrase "even death on a cross," its conceptual background, etc.

He divides the hymn into six stanzas (two lines for the first, second, fourth, and fifth stanzas and three lines for the remaining stanzas, what he calls the "climactic stanzas"). He views the phrase "death on a cross" as original to the hymn (see p. 97-98) which provides the center point and the turning point of the hymn. Having explored the features of this hymn and its possible background from the Jewish scriptural promises and the Greco-Roman imperial ideology, he concludes that "this passage very likely reflects the content and scope of early Christian hymns that were being used in worship" (p. 109).

The other two major hymns follow the same approach of the Philippian's, while noting the continuities and the innovations at different levels. In all the three major passages, the author exposes and analyses their connections and resemblances with the Jewish cultural hymnody and Greco-Roman ideology with revolutionary contexts. He divides the Colossian hymn into two strophes and an epode (which has the last two lines of the hymn). He recognizes the passage as hymnic because of its: broader context, the change in the use of personal pronouns – from first and second-person to third-person discourse –, the use of *hos estin* at the beginning of the first line of each of the two strophes, the identical rhythmic patterning of the first seven syllables of each strophe. The hymn is similar to the Philippian's: in the length of composition, the focus on Jesus, a direct reference to the cross, allusions to the Jewish scriptural themes; and different (kind of innovations) in its notion of preexistence,

the mention of Christ as an agent of creation of all things, the mention of the names of supernatural powers, and the description of the redemptive work of Jesus as God's agent in the reconciliation of all things. The structure and syntax of the Colossian hymn are presented in an Asiatic rhetorical style unlike that of a Semitic style of the Philipians.

MG argues that the prologue of John's Gospel is a Christian hymnic composition which was a result of a deep reflection on the earlier edition of the Gospel and added to it. Hence, he believes that the prologue postdates John's Gospel. It presents Jesus as God's revelation and the culmination of God's work in history rooted in Jewish history and tradition. It puts true worship on Jesus who is the center of divine revelation.

He divides the hymn into seven strophes, while setting aside the areas that concern the testimony of John the Baptist as commentary by the author or editor of the hymn. For MG, the portion interrupts the flow of the hymn and the last verse (1:18) helps to move from the hymn to the narrative that follows (he calls it an editorial explanation).

The emphasis on the agency of Christ is continued in the prologue. Christ is God's agent in the creation of all things. The wisdom traditions, temple imagery and covenantal themes are reflected in the poetic hymn. There is no explicit mention of the cross and the resurrection but these are referenced by the outcome of what Christ is described to have done (i.e. the ultimate revelation of the glory of God). The eschatological aspect of the hymn is obvious: by fulfilling the Jewish prophetic promises (e.g. Isa 40-66), God through Christ is inaugurating a new age, the age of renewal. The hymn does not leave out the use of certain concepts and imagery associated with the Roman imperial ideology (e.g. divine origin, enlightenment of humanity and gracious benefactor). The three hymns show that Christ is distinct from God, yet fully involved in the divine work of redemption.

In chapter six, the author explores together other New Testament Christological passages. He begins with the analysis of the hymnic expressions found in the passages of the epistles (Eph 2:14-16; 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 3:18-22 and Heb 1:14) then the psalms reference in the Lukan infancy narrative and concludes with the hymnic acclamation in Rev 4-5. He exposes scholars' different positions and arguments on the interpretations of the contents, contexts, origin and purposes of the different texts. These passages reflect and engage more with the Jewish motifs and traditions than other ancient traditions, but in Luke and Revelation elements of Roman imperial themes could be detected. They involve emphasis on the incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation.

In his analysis of 1 Pet 3:18, MG states that "the passage [3:18a] seems to be a digression on the theme of suffering from 1 Peter 3:17, which the author then resumes in 1 Peter 4:1" (p. 196). He then goes on to state as regards 3:18a that "Christ suffered." There seems to be inconsistency in the placement of the themes of suffering and death which depends largely on the textual variant that is favored: ἀπέθανεν (died) or ἔπαθεν (suffered). It will appear that the theme of suffering continues through verse 18 (where he says it seems to be a digression). It would have seemed appropriate to go by "Christ died" to maintain the digression of the themes. Furthermore, his claim that 1 Pet 3:19-21 elaborates the phrase "made alive in the spirit" needs to be explained – it is not enough to state that, bearing in mind the complexity of the whole passage.

The author of this book admits at the beginning of the analysis of the Lukan infancy hymns the difference they have with early Christological hymns presented in other passages: the former do not focus directly on Christ as much as they do on the redemptive work of God in the world. The two important motifs of these hymns rest on the themes of promise and fulfillment and the restoration of Israel. These passages, including Revelation, demonstrate a devout and worshipful response to the work of God through Christ. In all, the outcome is that the New Testament Christological hymns present a unique fusion of Jewish and Greco-Roman literary conventions and styles.

MG devotes some pages to the examination of Christian hymns after that of the New Testament Christological hymns. His examination shows that the latter play great roles in the development of the former in their thoughts and practices. He also exposes some contemporary implications of the New Testament Christological hymns and how they could further help shape the contemporary Christian service of worship. He does this in questioning mode.

The book is a great resource on the possible ancient hymnody influences on the New Testament Christological hymns which are necessary for the proper understanding of the intention and purposes of the hymns and their composers. The methodology and the order of presentation are good. They make the book interesting to read and follow the thoughts therein. It is a book recommended for lovers of Christian and ancient hymns and for the New Testament scholars, also for contemporary Christian hymn composers.

John S. ADIMULA

*Graduate Studies - Faculty of Theology
Dominican University College
Ottawa*

Louis ROY, **The Three Dynamisms of Faith, Searching for Meaning, Fulfillment and Truth**. Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 2017, 15,3 × 22 cm, 256 p., ISBN 978-0-81322-979-9.

Writing for contemporary but learned seekers, Roy presents a highly readable, provocative discussion of the affective, reasoned and transcendent dimensions of the human faith journey. Acknowledging warranted suspicion about founding arguments addressing matters of ultimate concern on appeals to cultural or religious authority, Roy adopts a deliberately anthropological approach that resonates with the analysis of open immanence found in the work of his fellow Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Approaching a complex topic with a patient, circling pedagogy, Roy probes the intermediating synergies of three dynamisms: affective craving for communion, reasoned questing for meaning and a receptive aspiration for truth beyond subjective manipulation. For readers willing to reflect about and beyond conventional religious practices and theological theories, Roy elucidates these contributing vectors in the journey of faith. Engaging an impressive range of classical and contemporary authors – Thomas Aquinas, John Henry Newman and Bernard