

The Christ Hymn

The most celebrated passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians is 2:6–11, often called the "Christ Hymn." Its poetic quality marks it as material that probably was used in early Christian worship as a creed or responsive reading or, indeed, as an actual hymn that was put to music and sung or chanted. Paul might have composed the piece himself, or he might be quoting material familiar to the Philippians from their liturgy.

Here is one of several ways in which the text might be arranged in verses that resemble a modern hymn:

Though he was in the form of God
 He did not regard equality with God
 As something to be exploited
 But emptied himself
 Taking the form of a slave
 Being born in human likeness
 And being found in human form
 He humbled himself
 And became obedient unto death—
 even death on a cross!
 Therefore God also highly exalted him
 And gave him the name
 That is above every name
 So that at the name of Jesus

Every knee should bend
 In heaven and on earth and under the
 earth
 And every tongue should confess
 That Jesus Christ is Lord
 To the glory of God the Father.

The focus of the hymn is on Christ Jesus (2:6), but it celebrates his career with allusions to the Old Testament. The voluntary humiliation of Christ in the first part draws on Isaiah 52:13–53:12, and the universal submission to him at the end quotes from Isaiah 45:23 (cf. Rom. 14:11). Also, Christ's willingness to give up his "equality with God" may be seen as a contrast to Adam's desire to attain equality with God in Genesis 3:1–7 (cf. Rom. 5:12–19).

Around 110, Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor, wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan to inform him of Christians. He said that when Christians gather at their meetings, they "chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a God" (*Epistulae* 10.96). The "Christ Hymn" of Philippians 2:6–11 seems like a perfect example of the sort of liturgical material that this Roman governor heard the Christians using.