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Orality and Intertextuality

James F. McGrath

Along with interest in intertextuality in all its forms, another major focus of interest in New Testament studies in recent years has been *orality*. Many associate orality with the period of oral storytelling and oral tradition that preceded the writing of the New Testament Gospels. But the study of orality in relation to the NT is much broader than this longstanding interest of NT scholars in oral tradition. In the world in which the NT writings were produced, literacy was rare, and writing was a highly specialized skill. As a result, most people who composed literature did so verbally while a scribe wrote down what they said, and more people heard literature read aloud than read it with their eyes on a page.

These two areas of scholarly interest—intertextuality and orality—are relevant to one another in ways that too frequently go unexplored, at least in relation to the study of the NT. The broader scholarly discussion of intertextuality, however, shows an awareness of the subject, if not always bringing the methods of orality studies to bear on it.¹ The study of orality intersects in turn with the psychology of memory, the role of storytelling in cultures, characteristics of oral tradition, and other subject areas which are given significant attention in relation to the NT, but once again, without

1. In relation to the Hebrew Bible, see e.g., Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*; also several of the contributions to Schmidt, *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writings*. For ancient Greece, see Cooper, *Politics of Orality*; Lentz, *Orality and Literacy in Hellenic Greece*. Important works have also touched on orality and intertextuality in time periods and cultural settings even further afield, such as Persia, India, the Arab world, and sub-Saharan Africa. Such works at times yield insights that may be useful to the student of the NT.

intertextuality featuring prominently if at all. Kelly Iverson sums up well the reason why there is a need for deeper connections to be forged between intertextuality and orality as approaches to the NT:

Despite a growing sensitivity to the oral context surrounding the Jesus tradition, discussions of intertextuality have yet to engage ancient media studies. Indeed, it is often assumed that intertextual techniques transcend media type and that the exchange between author and audience is not affected by the mode of delivery. . . . For both readers and hearers, intertextual association is a memory-rich process, but it is particularly demanding for audiences who must simultaneously access two contexts within the temporal flow of the performance and without recourse to written texts.²

The present chapter brings the interrelated aspects of intertextuality and orality to bear on Phil 2:6–11. The significance of the passage has often been tied to the question of whether the passage is a quotation from an already-existing hymn, and this is indeed an important matter as pertains to intertextuality.³ But there are other important questions too.

First, there are potentially at least two layers of intertextuality with which the interpreter has to deal.⁴ Paul may be quoting, alluding to, or echoing a hymn, but then the hymnic text itself features allusions or echoes of other texts. Bringing these multiple layers into the picture is important as we explore the text's range of possible meaning. Isaiah 45:23 is alluded to in the phrase "every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess." The story of Adam may also be echoed.⁵ And indeed, whatever one's views on whether a pre-Gospel passion narrative might have been *written* in Paul's time, the story of Jesus even in oral form is a *text* in the broad sense, and it is also in view in this passage. Here we have the possibility that Paul is quoting a hymn which in turn is quoting one Scripture, while echoing still other parts of Scripture, and also making reference to the story of Jesus that Christians were telling. Multilayered intertextuality is thus, whether as a help or a hurdle, a major consideration for the interpreter. But it is not the only crucial methodological consideration.

2. Iverson, "An Enemy of the Gospel?" 27, 29, drawing heavily on Edenburg, "Intertextuality, Literary Competence."

3. See the classic study by Martin, *Carmen Christi*; also Duling, *New Testament*, 108–37.

4. On this multi-layered situation see Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*, 118.

5. In this study, I do not assume (as some scholars do) that allusions and echoes necessarily function in different ways.

Second, the points mentioned above bring orality into the picture. One of the “texts” echoed or alluded to in this passage—the story of Jesus—may have existed only in oral form at the time the letter was composed. But in addition, most people who encountered Paul’s letter would have known Isaiah and Genesis through hearing them read aloud, rather than having read them for themselves. Orality is therefore relevant as the medium through which even written texts were known to most people who were familiar with them in this time period. Likewise, Paul’s own letter would have been read aloud to a gathering of people most of whom could not and would not ever read the letter as words on a page. And so bringing our best knowledge about oral communication into the picture is crucial. So too is our relating the considerations from orality to the perspectives from intertextuality.⁶ There are allusions which can be noticed—and connections which can be drawn—when reading texts, that simply cannot be *heard* in the same way, or *processed* in the same way, as is possible as when one can read a written text, consult another written text, then return to the first one and ponder the relationship between the two.⁷ Intertextuality and orality are not only both important to the interpretation of Phil 2:6–11, but they are also interrelated.

Finally, the question of persuasion is another crucial consideration, and it must be treated in connection with the first two perspectives. What is involved in the rhetoric of *oral* persuasion, and did Paul write so as to accomplish his aim effectively when his letter would be presented orally? How do intertextual allusions/echoes in an oral presentation serve to make a speaker’s case more persuasive? How would the Philippians’ knowledge or lack thereof have had an impact on the effectiveness or otherwise of Paul’s communication to them? What are the implications of such considerations for how we understand this part of Paul’s letter, and the Christology it offers?

I will work through each of these points, and towards the end tie strands into a cord that I hope will result in a persuasive case being offered about the persuasiveness or otherwise of what Paul wrote.

Echoes from Hymns

Let us start with the question of what the quotation of a hymn means for an argument. I will proceed on the assumption that Paul is here quoting a hymn, since that has become the scholarly consensus (I hope, however, that

6. On the intersection see Bauks, “Intertextuality in Ancient Literature,” 33–35.

7. On Paul’s references to Scripture in his letters and the relevance of orality and literacy to the perception of them, see especially Stanley, “Pearls before Swine” 130, 132, 134–36. See too Edenburg, “Intertextuality, Literary Competence” 145.

the points I make in this chapter do not depend on one's view regarding that question.) The echoing of hymns in sermons is a widespread phenomenon that can be examined even in our time, and has been studied in the context of a number of different cultures, including predominantly oral ones which may provide useful analogies to Paul's own context.⁸ Such studies offer an important challenge to our natural inclinations as readers living in a context of widespread literacy. How do echoes of hymns function within sermons, for instance, since Paul's letters often have a homiletic character? Paul's quotation is offered in support of his call to the Philippian recipients to think and behave in a particular way. A hymn echo can add emotional power if the hymn is well-known and widely cherished. The broader context of the other lines or verses of the hymn in question is not always relevant. Someone talking about perception of intertextual echoes might say that "we once were blind (in our ignorance of intertextuality), but now we see." The echo of a famous hymn may draw the attention of hearers to the point, reinforcing it and helping to fix it in the mind. This was one of the most important ways that communication in oral cultures made use of things already in the minds of hearers, using what hearers already knew as "pegs" on which to hang new information.⁹

The point in my example had nothing much to do with the content of the hymn "Amazing Grace," nor would the idea of being lost and subsequently found likely have come into your mind when I echoed the immediately-following line. The more familiar the words are, the more they can function on their own, decoupled from their original hymnic context. And the less familiar the hymn, the less likely it is that the allusion would be noticed, or that other parts of the hymn would be called to mind. This is just as well for the interpreter of Philippians, since we have no way of knowing what the remainder of the hymn may have been like, or whether there was anything else beside what we have quoted here. Whether this passage quotes an already-existing hymn or not, and whether the hymn was very, slightly, or not at all familiar to the Philippians, the likelihood of any conscious turning of thoughts to additional lines or stanzas is minimal, although in theory such a wider hymnic context may have provided resonances about which we as interpreters can, alas, never know.¹⁰

The main function of using a hymn quotation in communication is therefore not necessarily to call to mind other parts of the hymn, but to

8. See Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 143–45; Mieder, "Making a Way Out of No Way," 7–8; Finnegan, *Why Do We Quote?*, 165–66.

9. See McGrath, "On Hearing (Rather than Reading)," 76.

10. For more on the role of hymns in religious communities in more recent times, see Brown, *Word in the World*.

fix the points made in conjunction with the quotation in the mind of the hearer. This may be less true of literary as opposed to hymnic allusions, where the point may actually be to call to mind a whole *story* through an allusion to a single line or turn of phrase. The passage in Philippians fits into both categories, since we have a proposed allusion to a hymn, allusions to one or more texts from the Jewish Scriptures, and to the story of Jesus. And so the use of a hymn may have served primarily to fix Paul's point in the mind of hearers, the theme of the hymn presumably being at least broadly relevant to that point. But the specific contents of the hymn, with its echoes of Scripture and of the story of Jesus, will have created a multifaceted experience with multiple echoes, the impact of which must certainly have differed depending on who heard it, and what their prior knowledge was of the hymn and the Jewish Scriptures, among other things.

Echoes of Scripture from Hymns

Let us move from the level of the letter for a moment into the level of the hymn. What would the echoes of Scripture within the hymn have meant to those who sang it? Fortunately, once again we can ask what echoes of Scripture mean in hymns sung in other times and contexts including our own, to provide a basis for comparison. In a contemporary hymn, a phrase such as "Lamb of God" may bring to mind a specific story in the Gospel of John, or merely the broad theme of Jesus as sacrifice, or neither, depending not only on the contents of the other lyrics in the hymn, but also on the hearer's familiarity with Scripture in general, and with specific texts and their specific details. Many hymns which draw on specific Scriptures may fail to be fully understood or appreciated, despite the echo being unambiguous. For example, all who have sung the famous hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" in its original form in its entirety will have uttered the words "Here I raise my Ebenezer."¹¹ But that certainly does not mean that most who have done so have recognized the reference to 1 Samuel, or understood its meaning.

There has been significant debate over whether the hymnic passage in Philippians includes deliberate echoes of the story of Adam. Are the connections being *found* or *concocted* by modern interpreters, or is it a bit of both? What is the likelihood that a first-century audience of "Christians" in Philippi could and would have done the same? The terminological echoes of Genesis are slim to non-existent. But it does not always take specific terminology to create an echo of a story. Often a pattern may be noticeable

11. Robinson, *Collection of Hymns*.

even in the absence of echoed vocabulary. Let us imagine encountering the phrase, “James McGrath so cared about intertextuality, that he wrote his only chapter in this book, that whosoever readeth it should not misunderstand but have unending illumination.” The echo of John 3:16 is presumably obvious. Yet the verbal agreements with the prototype are largely in prepositions and conjunctions, and then in the overall structure, but not in the most important words in the original. So too, the terminological differences in Phil 2:6–11 have sometimes been considered decisive—being in the form (as opposed to image and likeness) of God, and grasping equality with God rather than a fruit that could make one like God. But the overall structure of the story, the mention of being like God, choosing whether to grasp at equality or submit to God in obedience, and the loss of status or being rewarded by God as a result, at each and every point involves either a structural echo of the Adam story, or what can be viewed as a deliberate inversion of that story. Since interpreters who agree about the Adamic echoes disagree about whether pre-existence and other such features are present in the hymn, ultimately this particular question has more to do with the resonances of the hymn for its hearers/singers, than with the settling of the wider array of Christological debates pertaining to this passage.

The question of how the hymn’s Christology relates to monotheism, however, is directly connected to the intertextual echoes towards the end of the hymn. There, we find wording from an adamantly monotheistic passage in Second Isaiah, used to acclaim the universal recognition of *Christ’s* lordship. It is perhaps not surprising that some have understood this passage in Paul as evidence for Paul’s redefinition or reconfiguration of monotheism. But at this point, we must remind ourselves of what we have already emphasized about intertextuality and orality. If the context of the words quoted was brought to mind by the allusion, then that would have served to convey that the hymn’s point was in line with the passage echoed. Conversely, if the echo was not sufficient to call the passage to mind, then no redefinition would have been detected by those who heard and sang it.¹² *Only if the words of the hymn conveyed disagreement with or modification of the outlook of the text echoed, and did so explicitly and clearly, would such a message have been detected.* Thus it is better (if possible) to understand the point of the hymn as in keeping with Jewish monotheism as understood in that time.¹³ The same point applies to the oft-raised question of whether Paul and others of his contemporaries cared about the original contexts of their quotations.

12. On the possibility that Paul’s echoes of Scripture may not have been detected by his audience in some instances, see Tolmie, *Persuading the Galatians*, 97, 111–12; Stanley, *Arguing with Scripture*.

13. On the use of the term “monotheism” see McGrath, *Only True God*, 1–54.

If they did not, then the monotheistic context in Isaiah becomes largely irrelevant to the meaning of the related words in this new context. And if they did care about the original context of their Scriptural quotations and allusions, then that monotheistic context must inform how the language is understood here.

Our interpreting the hymn as fully in line with Jewish monotheistic sensibilities is not at all difficult. It is God who exalts Jesus, above any status we are told that he previously held.¹⁴ God does so for God's own glory. This is accomplished by bestowing the divine name on Jesus as God's supreme agent, who expresses the divine will and rule on the one hand, and on the other, ultimately directs all glory gained in this role away from himself and towards God. This is a pattern that has parallels in Jewish literature—the bestowal of the divine name is connected with figures such as Yahoel and Metatron, while the receipt of acclamation by the appointed viceroy can be seen in texts such as the *Similitudes of Enoch*. There is no reason to think that this hymn was thought to do anything other than to give Jesus the highest status it was possible to envisage a human being occupying within the framework of first-century Jewish monotheism. Envisaging the early Christians as redefining monotheism through echoes of Scripture in hymnic and creedal phrases alone seems implausible, when we consider the amount of detailed discussion and debate around Scriptural texts that was felt to be necessary in connection with the redefinition of the role of the Torah. Explicit and detailed argument is necessary when modifying or challenging a core conviction, and the absence of such arguments is itself evidence that no such modification was being undertaken.

Returning to the subject of Paul's quotation of the hymn, if it is implausible to see the hymn itself as redefining monotheism on the level of its own text, it is all the more implausible to envisage Paul as using a quotation of a hymn which echoes Scripture to redefine monotheism, one further step removed from Isaiah. Paul's own statements about Jesus elsewhere, such as in 1 Cor 15:20–28, match the pattern we have argued that the hymn sets forth. Christ is one to whom universal rule is given by God, over everything but God, in order to ultimately subject all things to God. Also relevant is Paul's other use of the same text from Isaiah in Rom 14:11, where the point made is that everyone is accountable to God.¹⁵ It thus seems justified to

14. Note that it is God who honors Jesus, highly exalting him. And thus there is a marked difference from the way praise is offered to God, whose unique attributes and status are highlighted. See further Neyrey, "First, 'Only,'" 59–87.

15. Also worth noting is the treatment of this text in post-NT Christian writings. Augustine and Eusebius of Caesarea interpret it in a solidly monotheistic way, while Theodoret of Cyrus recognizes the entanglement in his time with the question of the

conclude that no redefinition of monotheism is involved in Paul's use of the hymn, any more than in the use of Isaiah within the hymn itself.¹⁶

Moreover, the persuasive power of the hymn depended on its use of echoes of Scripture to reinforce its message.¹⁷ Echoes of texts in a manner or context that subverted the very point of the text quoted, or which could be understood to do so, would have been counterproductive and detracted from the persuasive power of the author. If the hearers of Paul's words picked up on the echo, they would have understood Paul to be appealing to an emphatic affirmation of monotheism. If they failed to pick up on the echo, then they would simply have heard an acclamation of Christ's lordship which was ultimately "to the glory of God the Father." It is implausible to claim that Paul was making a subtle Christological point, much less one that no one is likely to have detected when the letter was read aloud to them.

Persuasion in the Hymn of Philippians 2:6–11

So what should we say about the message conveyed by Phil 2:6–11, its persuasive power, with its echoes of the story of Jesus and of monotheistic Scripture, and perhaps also of a hymn? The hymnic passage's relevance to Paul's point has been understood in a variety of ways—in salvation historical terms or in terms of *imitatio Christi*. But few would dispute that Paul was seeking to persuade the Philippians to think and to live in a certain way. When considered in this context, the hymnic section can be understood as an example of epideictic rhetoric, and there is in fact no need to choose between the often starkly-posed alternatives.¹⁸ On one level, the noble deeds of Christ do provide a model for obedience and humility, while the exaltation which is his reward is offered as motivation. But there is more to it in this case, due to the distinctive features of the theology that Paul and his readers shared. Unlike most examples of epideictic rhetoric, the Philippians

homoousion. See Elliott, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 84–85.

16. Contra Fowl, "Use of Scripture in Philippians," 170, who claims "By connecting this language and imagery to Jesus in Phil 2:10–11, by ascribing to Jesus the name *κύριος*, Paul is, as Richard Bauckham says, including Jesus within the identity of the one God of Israel. From Paul's perspective it appears that he wants to emphasize that willed self-emptying and obedient suffering are elements of God's identity." The emphasis seems to be on connecting Jesus' story to humanity's on the one hand, and connecting the story of Christians with Jesus' on the other. On the theocentric character of Paul's Christology here, see Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 254–55.

17. Cf. Fowl, "Use of Scripture in Philippians," 166–67.

18. On this passage as epideictic see especially Brucker, *Christushymnen oder epideiktische Passagen?*; Reumann, *Philippians*, 362, 364–76. On the neglect of epideictic in NT studies, see Kern, *Rhetoric and Galatians*, 126–29.

would have believed that they were “in Christ,” united with the one whose story was being depicted. This situated Paul’s readers and hearers as more than mere observers of an exemplary life from a distance.¹⁹ It is the logic of the eschatological tension—being united with Christ, being called to live as he did in the present age, being participants in a preliminary fashion with him in his entry into the age to come—that is offered as both theological context and motivation to the Philippian readers.

Paul does not, it seems to me, want his readers to see in Christ a unique divine incarnation whose unique mind leads to unique acts which accomplish salvation, as something external to them and which they could never hope to emulate. Rather, Paul wants them to recognize that Christ was a human being in whose new creation they are participants, and (in terms Paul articulates elsewhere) to allow the mind of the Last Adam to replace that of the First Adam in their own lives and experience. It is the one God who hyper-exalted Jesus, who has also connected them with him and allows them to experience this transformation in the present and hope for the future in their lives. Anything other than a genuinely monotheistic reading of Paul’s argument here does more than just undermine the foundation of his point.²⁰ It also distracts from that point. The history of scholarship about this passage illustrates this well.²¹ Rather than understanding how Paul uses the logic of the strict monotheism of Isaiah, and the obedience and reward of the Last Adam, to motivate Christians to live in a particular way, the Christology of the hymn, allegedly offering a radically new and innovative Christological monotheism, has been understood as an end in itself, and become the focus of our attention, bracketed out from its context in Paul’s letter and the use to which Paul put it. And yet, for Paul to have been making an innovative Christological point here, he would have needed to defend and justify that point in relation to the talk of “one God” for which Jews were famous, and which Paul himself was known to have used. By recognizing that Paul here assumes rather than redefines Jewish monotheism, it frees the interpreter to see the persuasive power of the Christ hymn,

19. See most recently Lynn Cohick on participation in Christ and the hymn’s meaning: Online: <http://www.koinoniablog.net/2013/10/philippians-christ-hymn-lynn-cohick-new-commentary.html>. See also Silva, *Philippians*, 95–97.

20. On the relevance of the other instance of Paul citing the same part of Isaiah, see McGrath, “On Hearing (Rather than Reading) Intertextual Echoes,” 77.

21. So also Silva, *Philippians*, 20–21. For an example, see how Fowl, “Use of Scripture in Philippians,” 171, is forced to focus on Christological debates and developments of subsequent centuries, and to suggest that Paul used this hymn or composed this passage without grasping the radical implications of what it was doing.

and of the monotheistic Scriptural echoes within it, in the context of Paul's letter.²²

This is not to pose a false antithesis for the interpreter, as though there is a stark choice to be made, requiring that the passage be understood as one of two types of encomium. In ancient literature one finds praises offered to a divine figure for doing what mere mortals cannot, and praises offered to a human figure for accomplishing something that the hearer might also hope to. It is possible to see both ideas here by understanding the passage in a manner that is fundamentally in keeping with first-century Jewish monotheism. Jesus' life of obedience led, according to the hymn, to his being given the divine name and exalted to a place of universal rule on God's behalf. The sharing of the divine name might indeed be called a sharing of the divine identity, given how closely connected name and identity are. But this is presented, not as something that Jesus innately possesses, but as a reward for his obedience. This divine action in response to Christ's human action, when coupled with the conviction that the Philippian believers were united with Christ, would have provided a double motivation for the Philippians to let this mind be in them which also was in Christ Jesus. The monotheistic conviction of one God, at work in—and in response to—the story of Jesus, would have given Paul's words persuasive power for an audience which shared Paul's core convictions about God, Jesus, and Scripture.

Conclusion

Whether Paul quoted a familiar hymn or quoted an unfamiliar hymn or composed this encomium himself, Paul's echoes of the stories of Israel's one God, and of the First and Last Adams, were offered as motivation to the Philippians, asking them to respond in a particular way to a unique show of unmatched divine power and an imitable display of human obedience. We have good reason to conclude that Paul's point, read aloud to the Philippians, would have been met with a response that he would have found satisfactory. I can only hope that my own written presentation, with its own quotations, echoes, and allusions, may be found persuasive by readers as well.

22. On whether Paul could be assumed to know and recognize the context of all his Scriptural allusions, see Stanley, "Pearls before Swine" 137.

Recommended Reading

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