

The New Testament's christological hymns are songs of resistance

## **They use the conventions of Jewish resistance poetry to challenge Roman occupation.**

by [Zen Hess](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **New Testament Christological Hymns**

Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance

By Matthew E. Gordley

IVP Academic

In a class on ministry, Will Willimon often referred to “the great theologian of our age”—meaning Bob Dylan, whose poetic expression of antiwar convictions helped Willimon articulate a Christian conviction of nonviolence. Dylan isn’t my style, so I was delighted when another professor, Amy Laura Hall, referred to Rage Against the Machine in a class on Christian love. Rage’s poetic rejection of corruption and injustice provided Hall with just the right words to help teach us that Christian love is noncoercive.

As it turns out, one of the songs Hall quoted from was “Maggie’s Farm,” a Dylan song that Rage covered. “Maggie’s Farm” is a timeless proclamation of resistance, so it is no surprise that it was revised into a new form for a younger generation.

This isn’t the first time protest songs have been revamped. According to Matthew E. Gordley, the christological hymns of the New Testament—in Philippians 2, Colossians 1, John 1, and elsewhere—were inspired by the tradition of Jewish “resistance poetry.” The Jewish poems of resistance, Gordley writes, “show an implicit, and at times explicit, concern for resistance to other grand narratives about reality that may have a claim on the lives of the community members.” In exile, new cultural contexts threatened to grind down Jewish identity, replacing it with the “grand narrative” of Babylonian or Roman culture. Their resistance poems, like the Psalms of Solomon, “provided a means for the community not merely to praise God but to articulate its understanding of itself in relation to its current circumstances and the traditional Jewish beliefs it had inherited.”

Early Christians faced pressure from other grand narratives. The first generations of Christians would have heard propaganda in the form of Roman hymns that “played a role in promoting the overall message of imperial benefits and blessings to the conquered peoples of the empire.” Their response, it seems, was to revamp the tradition of Jewish resistance poetry into hymns of resistance.

The Colossians hymn attacks what Ulrich Huttner has called the “legitimation of imperial power” by refuting the headship of Caesar and asserting Christ’s own universal authority. Christ’s self-lowering to the “form of a slave,” as described in the Philippians hymn, promotes a characteristic wildly opposed to the emperor’s quest for divinity. These examples show that one purpose of these early

christological hymns was to resist the empire by displaying the character of God revealed through Christ in a way that formed Christians into a different kind of people.

It is not only the lyrical content of the early Christian hymns that is subversive. Hymn sings were Greco-Roman before they were Baptist. The Romans sang hymns for everything. By contrast, the Jewish people loved their psalms but, as Gordley indicates, “there is very little evidence to suggest the presence of hymn singing within early Jewish synagogues.” Christian hymn singing, it seems, evolved from the convergence of Jewish poetic traditions with Roman culture. The early church not only led people to diverge from Roman imperial ideologies but did so by co-opting one of the empire’s tools for indoctrination. What’s more subversive than that?

While it is unlikely that early Christians ever sang these particular New Testament hymns in their canonical form, Gordley’s thorough and creative analysis of the historical contexts and textual content of the hymns gives readers a window into their significance as culture-forming, empire-resisting praise songs. This is, of course, only one aspect of the hymns. Their primary function is to “praise the divine” and to “describe the actions and attributes of the one being praised.”

But I’m most drawn to Gordley’s emphasis on the subversive nature of early Christian hymns, perhaps because I do not know whether the contemporary church sees the function of hymns and worship songs in this way. My beloved professors used Bob Dylan and Rage Against the Machine to resist the grand narratives that threaten the faithfulness of the church. But I think pastors will have a difficult time convincing congregations to sing “Maggie’s Farm,” in any of its versions. And we shouldn’t need to. Perhaps we need, instead, to write new hymns of resistance, in the tradition of the New Testament christological hymns.