

The Odes of Solomon: Their Origin and Use in Early Christianity

by
Lee Martin McDonald

According to Ephesians 5:18-20, the evidence of the fullness of the Spirit among the followers of the risen Christ is seen in their:

speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Greek = *w/jdai`B*) singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God even the father, submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.

Some of those songs were remembered in the church for centuries and some were included in the New Testament literature (1 Tim 3:16; Phil 2:6-11; Luke 1:46-56; Rev 4:11; 5:9-10, 12-13) and remain today. Many if not all of the ancient Psalms were sung in the congregation of Israel (see for example Ps 27, 62, 75, 76, 128, 130, *passim*). Singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving has deep roots in Judaism, and the early church, as a Jewish sect, followed this pattern in preparing and even adapting various songs of the faith for worship in the Christian community.

One of the oldest surviving collections of sacred hymns sung in the early churches that are outside of the NT is the late first or second century collection known as the *Odes of Solomon*. There were originally forty-two hymns in this collection, but Ode 2 and part of Ode 3 in the collection are now lost. The rest of the Odes have been recovered from the various manuscripts that have survived antiquity.

The Odes survive in fragmentary condition in Greek and Syriac and may have originated in Syria or even Palestine. The authorship attributed to Solomon is not explained anywhere and may have been attributed to him because he was well known for wisdom teachings. The contents of the Odes do not reflect in any way

on Solomon or the tradition that followed him. Because there are clear references to Christian beliefs in the Odes, the author obviously wanted to reflect Christian views of Jesus (birth, death, resurrection, humanity, and others), as well as his praise of God. There is still much that we do not know about these spiritual songs such as the identity of the author and their specific provenance, but there is a broad consensus today that they are *Christian* hymns reflecting the faith of early Jewish Christians at the end of the first century or early second century of the Common Era. They are broadly reflective of the proto-orthodox theology of early Christianity.

The Odes were discovered by J. R. Harris 1909 in a Syriac manuscript in his library. The collection contained 56 leaves in fascicles of six containing not only forty of the Odes, but also contains the eighteen *Psalms of Solomon*. Before the year 1909, all that was known of the Odes was that Lactantius' cited a single quotation of *Ode 19.6 (Div. Inst. 4.12.3)*.

A second Syriac manuscript was discovered by F. C. Burkitt in the British Museum in 1912 (Add. 14583 = Odes 17.7 to the end). The 11th Ode was discovered in the Bodmer Papyrus XI (= P⁷²) and is in Greek. It contains, along with 1-2 Peter and Jude, several non-canonical writings, namely the *Nativity of Mary*, apocryphal correspondence to Paul, and the apocryphal *3 Corinthians*, the 11th Ode of *Odes of Solomon*, Melito's *Homily on the Passover*, a fragment of a hymn, the *Apology of Phileas*, Psalms 33 and 34, plus Jude and 1 & 2 Peter. Notice that Jude precedes 1 and 2 Peter!

This is significant since P⁷² (dating probably from the third to the early fourth century) is *one* of the earliest collections of Christian sacred texts in one volume that contains more than one book. P⁴⁵ contains fragments of the four canonical Gospels and Acts and P⁴⁶ contains the earliest collection of Paul's letters. Only fourteen of the known 117 surviving papyrus manuscripts contain more than one

book, so this is unusual and it is remarkable that the collection contains not only written texts likely considered as sacred scripture, but also sacred songs and hymns. This codex manuscript (P⁷²) presents us with an early Christian collection of sacred texts and, like the Old Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls, it also contains sacred songs sung in the early Christian communities. According to Phillip Comfort, the text of P⁷² is as a whole superior to that of Codex Vaticanus (B), and it also reflects the “Western” uncontrolled-type text and has several independent readings.¹

Scholars of the ancient non-canonical writings have long-recognized that the *Odes of Solomon*, a collection of forty-two spiritual songs, were written in a Jewish community, and from within the broad perspective of first or second-century Judaism. Further, the author of these hymns was likely an Essene convert to the Christian faith, but the exact identity of its author and provenance continue to be a matter of scholarly debate. The collection may have originated in Edessa in Syria or even in Palestine (Galilee?). Metzger supplies the range of suggested authorship in recent times as follows: (1) that it was written by a Jewish Christian (Leipoldt, Bartlet, Abbott); (2) an orthodox Christian who emphasized sacramental mysticism (Bernard, Lake, Plooi, Selwyn); (3) a “paganized” Christian (Bouseset, Reinach, Lebourt, Loisy, Guidi, Connolly); (4) a full-fledged Gnostic (Gunkel, Gressmann, Clemen, Abramowski); (5) a Montanist (Conybere, Fries); a disciple of John – because of the parallels in thought; or (7) Bardesanes (Sprengling, Newbold).²

Most scholars have recognized the peculiar Christian focus in a number of the Odes and consequently suggest that these odes were produced by a Jewish Chris-

¹ Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett, eds., *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts: A Corrected, Enlarged Edition of The Complete Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.), 479.

² Bruce M. Metzger, “Odes of Solomon,” in L. A. Loetscher, ed., *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1955) 2:811-12.

tian, likely a convert from the Essenes, and perhaps as early as the late first century (80 to 125 AD) and up to the end of the second century, but more likely in the early part of the second century, namely before the Bar Kochba rebellion in 132-135, after which Christians were excluded from the synagogues.

Although some scholars have argued for a Greek original for the Odes, since it is found in the Bodmer collection of Greek papyri (see P. Bod. XI, 3rd or early 4th cent. = P⁷²), the collection was more likely produced in Syriac (or Aramaic), and it could have been produced in Palestine near the end of the first century or the first part of the second. The main images of the Odes are taken from the Jewish Scriptures, but without any specific quotation from them or the New Testament scriptures. There are a number of parallels in thought and expression with Jewish Scriptures, especially the *Psalms of Solomon*, in them.³ There are also parallels with the Qumran *Hodayoth* (thanksgiving hymns) in its exalted mysticism. The author was also likely a student of John, who wrote the New Testament Gospel, or of the Johannine tradition since there are also a number of parallels between the Gospel of John and 1 John and the Odes, especially in terms of the dualism of light and darkness. It is also possible, as noted above, that the author was a converted Essene since there are parallels in thought and word with the *Hodayoth* at Qumran. This is not certain, but the similar language in the *Hodayoth* suggests that possibility. The circulation of the *Odes* along with the eighteen *Psalms of Solomon* in Christian manuscripts also adds to this possibility. This suggests that the author of the Odes may have come from the same community of Christians who were familiar with the teachings of the Gospel of John.

Since five of the Odes were translated into Coptic in the fourth century and included in the Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia* (Odes 1, 5, 6, 22, and 25), some scholars

³ James H. Charlesworth, *Critical Reflections on the Odes of Solomon*. JSPS 22 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), Vol. 1:192-257.

have posited that the Odes are Gnostic, but there is no evidence that the later second century notions attributed to gnostic Christianity were also true of the Odes. The author of *Pistis Sophia*, a gnostic text in the later 3rd or early fourth century, appears to have cited and made use of the Odes as sacred Scripture citing the complete texts of *Odes Sol.* 1, 5, 6, 22, and 25. The *Odes of Solomon*, however, displays the opposite since the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ are clearly presented in the Odes. While some of the Odes reflect a gnostic perspective (Odes 19 and 35), they cannot be characterized as a gnostic hymnbook and the Gnostic dualism is minimized or contradicted in many of the odes (7.20 f., 16.10 f.).

Other references to the Odes in early Christianity include Lactantius (ca. 240-320, converted to Christianity ca. 300), the teacher of Crispus, the son of Constantine, quoted Ode 19 in the late fourth century (*Div. Inst.* 4.12.3). The Odes were also mentioned in the sixth century Pseudo-Athanasius, *Synopsis Sacrae Scripture* catalogue of sacred books in the Old Testament, namely “There are also other books of the Old Testament not regarded as canonical but read to the catechumens. . . . Maccabees. . . . Psalms and Odes of Solomon, Susanna.”⁴ Likewise, the Odes are listed in a similar way in the *Stichometry* of Nicephorus (9 ff. ca. 850 AD). In the 10th century, a scribe copied the Odes in Syriac, but only Odes of Sol 17:7-42:20 are preserved (see British Museum ms. Add. 14538). In the 15th century another scribe copied them in Syriac and here again the beginning is lost (see John Rylands Library, Cod. Syr. 9 that contains Odes 3.1b-42.20).

There is a possibility that the Odes were preserved also in the twelfth century minuscule manuscript 1505 that is housed at Laura Monastery on Mt. Athos in Greece. The full details of the contents of that manuscript are not currently available, however, but the known list of books in this New Testament collection of

⁴ This is translated by Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. 1, *The Beginnings of Patristic Literature* (Utrecht-Antwerp: Spectrum Publishers, 1950), 162.

books includes Psalms and Odes. The list of NT writings does not include the Book of Revelation. It is informative that the Psalms and Odes are in a *New Testament* collection!⁵ Interestingly, the order of books in the manuscript is odd by today's Bibles, namely after listing the Gospels, Acts, and the Catholic and Pauline Epistles, the manuscript concludes with Hebrews, Psalms, and "Odes." Again, it is not certain that these Odes are the *Odes of Solomon*, but this manuscript does give evidence that the copier/scribe who copied this collection of Christian Scriptures also included both Psalms and Odes in a New Testament collection as late as the *twelfth* century!

According to Bouyer, the Odes appear at times to be a collection of commentaries on Johannine themes such as light and life,⁶ a feature that has led some scholars to conclude that the writer was a disciple of John or at least a strong admirer of him. It has been suggested that following the reading of the John 1:1-18, a reading of the Odes would fit in well with the theology and perspective of John. The parallels suggest either a direct disciple of John or one from the community that welcomed the writings of John. If the Odes were written at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, it is quite possible that the author of the Odes was a disciple of the John who wrote the Gospel and Johannine letters.

It is also clear that the author of the Odes knew the Davidic Psalter, though he does not quote it directly. Compare, for instance Psalm 1:2 with Ode 41:6 and compare Psalm 84:10 with Ode 4:5. Like the most of the Psalter, the Odes reflect

⁵ The full collection includes: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, Psalms, and Odes. It is not presently clear which psalms or odes are attached to this New Testament manuscript.

⁶ Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*. Vol. 1, A History of Christian Spirituality (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), 182.

joy and rejoicing especially in the appearance and triumphal life of the “long awaited Messiah.”⁷

Like the organizers of the Old Testament scriptures who included psalms and the collectors of sacred texts at Qumran, who included the Psalms and the *Hadoyot* in their collection, P⁷² and ms 1505 reflect early and later Christian decisions to include in a sacred collection both psalms and spiritual songs. The scribe who collected and produced the minuscule manuscript 1505 saw the same benefit of including spiritual songs (odes) in a collection of sacred texts for the church.

As we saw above, the NT letter Ephesians reflects early Christian activity producing in sacred songs. The writer’s admonished the readers to be filled with the Spirit and to speak to one another “in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs (Greek = w/jdai`ß pneumatikai`ß), singing (Greek = av/jdonteß) and making melody (yavllonteß) in your hearts to the Lord, giving thanks (eujcaristou`nteß) to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, being subject (uJpotassovmenoi) to one another our of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:18-21).⁸ Other New Testament passages reflect the practice of the early Christians producing spiritual songs (e.g., Luke 1; Phil 2:6-11; 1 Tim 3:16; Rev. 4:11; 5:9-10, 12-13).

Some Christians have asked whether Christians should read this so-called non-canonical ancient Christian literature since the ancient church councils eventually excluded it from the Christian biblical canon, the sacred collection of Christian

⁷ James H. Charlesworth, “Odes of Solomon,” in *ABD* 6:114-115.

⁸ While a number of modern translations and both Greek texts (Nestle/Aland 27th edition and United Bible Society 4th edition) separate vs. 21 from vss. 19-20 and connects it to vs. 22 to moderate the command of women to be subject to their husbands, that cannot be justified from the ancient manuscripts that have survived. There are five present active participles that depend on the Greek verb (plhrou`sqe). When we compare this to Col 3:16-19, the parallel passage, it does not have the break in the same place, nor include a mutual submission of men and women before listing the social duties of families.

writings. I do not see a problem with Christians today being informed by the same literature that informed the early Christians. This includes much of what we now call the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings, both Jewish and Christian. Some of these writings were welcomed as scripture by some of the early Christians, especially the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (*Ecclesiasticus*), *1 Enoch*, the *Didache*, *1 Clement*, *Letters of Ignatius*, and *Shepherd of Hermas*, but also many others as well. Because of this, it is difficult to justify ignoring them. This literature often fills in many of the gaps in our understanding of early Christianity, for example, notions of life after death, burial practices, special terms such as Son of Man, phenomenal births, and the social context of early Christianity. Biblical scholarship has advanced considerably over the years by being informed by the literature that is closest in time and theological substance to the biblical writings.

For some Christians, the growing knowledge of a large number of ancient apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings raises questions about the need to re-open the biblical canon. Also, what if someone discovered the real Epistle to the Laodiceans? What if we found the *first* letter of Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5:9)? What would we do with it? At the very least, it would be an advantage to Christian faith to read this literature and know more precisely what the earliest followers of Jesus believed and thought!

The odes reflect early Jewish Christian perspectives and theology most clearly in Ode 7 that describes the Incarnation, Ode 19 that exalts the conception by the Virgin (compare with the *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.14) and claims that the birth was painless to Mary in contrast to Eve's child-bearing. Ode 12 sings in praise of the Logos similar to John 1. Ode 28 offers a poetical description of the Passion of Je-

sus and Ode 42 has as the final theme of the resurrection of Christ and his victory in Limbo, the intermediate state of those waiting for the resurrection.⁹

The Odes were likely written when Jewish Christians made up a larger portion of the church in the east, but also to some extent when the emerging Gnostic views were not yet widely rejected in churches. Jewish influence in the church was more prominent before the largely complete separation of the Christians from Judaism following the 132-135 CE Bar Kochba rebellion in the Land of Israel. The Odes never mention the name of Jesus, but like the Jewish Psalms of Solomon, they use the term “Messiah” in several places. What makes the collection in its current form more likely a Christian document is that the Odist reflects awareness of Jesus’ baptism, his death and resurrection, and the titles for Jesus that were well known in early Christianity. Often these reflections are in less than precise language—a feature common in spiritual songs, but filled with metaphorical language. The more specific Christian features in the odes include: Ode 15 (Lord, light vs. Dark), Ode 29 (The Christ of the Lord, He is the Lord, He has led me in His light), Ode 30 (Drink of the living spring of the Lord, Come, all you who are thirsty).

I have focused on the way these ancient Jewish-Christian songs functioned in the Christian communities and somewhat on their status vis-à-vis the sacred Scripture collection of the early Christians, namely they were included in several Christian sacred collections. Clearly some early churches included sacred songs within their scripture collections. They no doubt inherited this pattern from their Jewish siblings (the Old Testament Psalms that were intended to be sung) and the Dead Sea Scrolls that included not only a larger collection of Psalms, but also the *Hodayot* that sang praise to God. Christians today do not include a collection of hymns

⁹ I am dependent here on Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht-Antwerp: Spectrum Publishers, 1950) 1:162-165, for these reflections.

in their Bibles, but it is widely recognized that much of the theology of the church has been put to music over the centuries and with great value. In these spiritual songs, we recognize that the Spirit of God did not depart from the Church shortly after the death of the last writer of the New Testament! God continued to speak and minister in the Christians who lived in the period after the close of the New Testament era.

We are greatly indebted to Chuck Fromm, his colleagues, and James Charlesworth for making the *Odes of Solomon* available to a wider audience than was possible before. It is a remarkable collection of early Christian hymns and the church today can be greatly enriched by these Odes as a reflection of the faith of their Jewish-Christian brothers and sisters who formed the early Christian churches.

Lee Martin McDonald
President Emeritus, Acadia Divinity College
Adjunct Professor of New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary
President of the Institute for Biblical Research
December 1, 2008