EXTRACT FROM "Worship is a Bowl of Noodles – OR – What would Jesus sing? By Dennis Prince

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Songs from an Ancient Hymnal

I have a son-in-law who sends me the latest weird emails that seem to appear from nowhere and then circle the globe. One day he sent a collection of classified advertisements. Among them was this:

> **WANTED: Somebody to go back in time with me. This is not a joke. You'll get paid after we get back. Must bring your own weapons. Safety not guaranteed. I have only done this once before.**

If only! What wonders we could perform if we could go back in time. Wrongs could be righted; facts could be established, history books corrected. We could see how the early church was run, examine their faith first hand, listen to the songs they sang, study their theology. Alas! All this lives only in the world of fantasy. Oh for that time machine!

So the bad news is we shall never see an early Christian songbook. They disappeared long ago.

The good news is that five of the early songs *have* been preserved for us. Right in the pages of the New Testament. It is well documented but not many know about it.

Five early Christian songs, buried in the writings of the apostle Paul. Like ancient treasure chests they lie there, waiting for us to exhume them, lift the lid and claim the riches inside.

Now the Bible carries no titles to announce these songs, no copyright notices and no names of composers. How then do we know they are songs?

There are several pointers:

- The way in which the sentences are constructed in the original Greek suggests they are songs. This is not obvious to us as we read them in English – the flow is lost in translation.
- The solemn and stately ring of some of the words.
- The fact that some of the passages are presented as a quote (e.g. *That is why it is said* … Ephesians 5:14), yet the passage is not found in the Old Testament and the source is otherwise unknown.

Bible commentators are consistent in their belief that these are early Christian songs. The footnotes of your Bible may well have explanatory references to them.

Here are the five songs, with the longer ones first. Try to imagine them being sung at your church. We will make a note of the issues covered in each song and look for any patterns.

Song One

He is the image of the invisible God,
The firstborn over all creation.
For by him were all things created;
Things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,
Whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;
All things were created by him and for him.

He is before all things,
And in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body, the church;
He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead,
So that in everything he might have the supremacy.

For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him,
And through him to reconcile to himself all things,
Whether things on earth or things in heaven,
By making peace through his blood,
Shed on the cross.
(Colossians 1:15-20)

The issues dealt with in this song are:

- The supremacy of Jesus in creation
- The supremacy of Jesus in redemption.

Song Two

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:5-11)

The message in this song is:

- Jesus is divine
- He humbled himself by becoming human
- He died on a cross
- He was exalted to the highest place.

Song Three

Here is a trustworthy saying:
If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with him.
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
if we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.
(2 Timothy 2:11-13)

Note: "*If we die with him*" does not refer to martyrdom. It relates to Romans 6:5 – "*If we have been united with him in his death, we will also be united with him in his resurrection*." It speaks of our baptismal *death*. (Romans 6:4).

So the song is talking about:

- Consequences of our union with the resurrected Jesus
- Our obligations in this amazing relationship, and
- The faithfulness of Christ.

Song Four

… He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.
(1 Timothy 3:16)

Note: Bible commentators tell us that the Greek lyrics of this song are most impressive. The author was a gifted writer.

The first line is superbly succinct but carries weighty truth about Jesus:

- "He appeared" implies his *pre-existence*
- "In a body" tells us the divine One came as a *man.*

In just a few short lines this song covers his entire work on earth and his resurrection to glory.

Song Five

This is why it is said:
'Wake up, O sleeper,
Rise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you.'
(Ephesians 5:13)

The song is a message to sinners (*sleeper*, *dead*) to:

- Wake up
- Allow Christ to shine on them with his life-giving light.

Summarising the content of these five songs:

Song 1. Jesus' supremacy in creation and redemption
Song 2. Jesus' divinity, humiliation, death and exaltation
Song 3. Our union with Jesus, and his faithfulness
Song 4. Jesus' pre-existence, humanity, mission and exaltation
Song 5. An exhortation for the sinner to wake up and receive Jesus' life-giving light

Can you see a pattern here? It leaps from the page! These are songs about *Jesus and redemption*! This is what the new covenant is all about.

Paul is one-eyed … on Christ and his redemption.

His message is plain: *Jesus Christ and him crucified* (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Our songs should throb with the same theme and the same passion.

More inspired songs

There are more inspired songs preserved for us in the New Testament - in the *Book of Revelation* - about eight of them.

John tells us that some of them are songs. For the rest he doesn't say whether or not they are songs, but introduces them with words like "*They said* …" Once again, though, because of their rhythmic and unusual nature, Bible commentators tell us they are songs. Some are quite short.

Here they are:

Song 6

Sung by the four living creatures.

Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is, and is to come.
(Revelation 4:8b)

This song of sleepless praise is focused on God's attributes of:

- holiness,
- omnipotence,
- eternal nature.

Song 7

Sung by the 24 elders.

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
To receive glory and honour and power,
For you created all things,

And by your will they were created
And have their being. (Revelation 4:11)

Another song of praise. It is directed to:

- God as creator of all things,
- God as *Lord* and *God.*

Note that *Lord* was the title assumed by Domitian, the Roman emperor at the time. To apply the title to anyone else could bring death. This is a brave song.

Song 8

Sung by the living creatures and the elders.

And they sang a new song:
You are worthy to take the scroll
And to open its seals,
Because you were slain,
And with your blood
You purchased men for God
From every tribe and language
And people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom
And priests to serve our God,
And they will reign on the earth.
(Revelation 5:9-10)

A song of praise to Jesus, for his *worthiness* to open the seals. He is worthy because …

- He died for *all* people
- He bestowed royalty upon us
- He made us priests.

These are monumental and far-reaching blessings for men and women. No wonder the living creatures and elders praise him.

Song 9

(Sung by myriads of angels)

In a loud voice they sang:
Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
To receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
And honour and glory and praise!
(Revelation 5:12)

This is a song of praise to Jesus, telling us again of his sacrificial death. It then lists *seven* of his great possessions:

- *Four attributes*: power, wealth, wisdom and strength.
- *Three worshipper responses*: honour, glory and praise.

There is a close resemblance in this passage to the words of praise King David gives to God in 1 Chronicles 29:10-12:

Praise be to you, O Lord, God of our father Israel,
From everlasting to everlasting.
Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendour,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.
Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things.
In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.
Now, O God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.

This is a fabulous passage of pure praise. Go through it and see the large number of God's attributes that are listed.

Song 10

To him who sits on the throne
and to the Lamb
be praise and honour and glory and power,
for ever and ever.
(Revelation 5:13b)

This song presents God and Jesus as worthy of eternal worship. God is honoured because he occupies the highest place (the throne). The title chosen for Jesus is the *Lamb* - reminding us of *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.* (John 1:29).

So, two things stand out:

- the supremacy of God and
- redemption.

Take a Look at the Lamb

The use of the expression *The Lamb* in Revelation is significant. Jesus has many titles and he could have been called by any of them. But *The Lamb* is favoured far above all others in this book. Look at the numbers:

TITLE	Number of times used in Revelation
Son of God	1
Son of Man	2
Christ	4
Lord	5
Jesus	7
Jesus Christ	7
Lamb	27

Why is this?

I suggest that heaven dwellers have a better idea of eternal issues than we do, and this influences their choice of words. *Lamb of God* carries a wealth of meaning.

First, we have the *Jewish Passover* as mentioned earlier and the reference to Jesus in John 1:25 *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

Jesus is our sacrificial lamb who has freed us from the grip of sin and death, given us eternal life in heaven and saved us from the horrors of hell. His willingness to be that *Lamb* sacrifice is spelled out in a *second prophetic passage,* Isaiah 53:7.

> *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;*
> *he was led like a* ***lamb*** *to the slaughter,*
> *and as a* ***sheep*** *before her shearers is silent,*
> *so he did not open his mouth.*

Jesus is glorious. He has many infinitely wonderful attributes and has done countless astounding things. But the one that won the hearts of heaven, the one that draws the highest praise, is his work as *the Lamb*, the One who meekly laid down his life to save lost men and women.

This is what sets the theme for the songs of heaven.

And it should set the theme for the songs we sing on earth!!!

Song 11

> *Salvation belongs to our God,*
> *who sits on the throne,*
> *and to the Lamb.*
> (Revelation 7:10)

Again, God and Jesus are the focus of this song.

- Again the throne reminds us of the supremacy of God
- And again we sing of Jesus *the Lamb.*

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Song 12

> *Amen!*
> *Praise and glory*
> *And wisdom and thanks and honour*
> *And power and strength*
> *Be to our God forever and ever.*
> *Amen!*
> (Revelation 7:12)

- Song 12 is a song which gives every atom of glory to God alone

Song 13

There was a special reason for the next song. The brave singers, whoever they were, had just emerged from a battle – perhaps the most dreadful battle of all time. It was fought against *the beast and his image and over the number of his name.* (Verse 2) Now we may not know exactly who this beast is, but we are left in no

doubt about his nature. He was evil itself. And he was powerful. He was BAD. Nevertheless, we are told, the warriors had *been victorious* over this monster, so we could well expect a song of victory.

Imagine now if you had been the one who whipped this beast, and you were writing the song about the fight. What would you say? Something like this might spring to mind. (Don't worry, this is my own creation!) *VERSE:*

The beast stood so mighty,
His voice a great roar,
But we looked up in faith,
We stood there before
Him, and spoke in the name
Of God's risen Son;
And the beast fled in terror.
The battle was won.

CHORUS:

Stand up and defy him
With hands lifted high.
Stand up and resist him,
Push back the dark tide,
And know that we march with
The victory side.

In this battle we had been co-workers with God. We had resisted the evil, held our ground, believed in God. So the Lord had given us victory. We sing of the triumph!

Not heaven dwellers. They have another perspective. With unveiled eyes they see God, his supremacy and justice, his righteousness and holiness. All else is not worth a handful of sand. They are single-minded. Here is their song:

Song 13

Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.
Who will fear you, O Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.
(Revelation 15:3-4)

The point I am making is the comparison between fallen mankind and the perfection and wonder of God**.** It is like setting a grain of sand alongside the globe we call earth and comparing the two. Which is the greater?

It's not that we are nothing. For we are infinitely wonderful, made in the image of God. *No. It is just that God is great.* But when our lives are filled with ourselves, we magnify our own image and diminish that of God. We need to see with the eye of faith, see things as the Bible describes them and let those visions shape our perspective of God.

Then *our songs will be like theirs in heaven*, the song of the victorious saints.

Next song:

Song 14

Hallelujah!
Salvation and glory and power
belong to our God,
for true and just are his judgments.
(Revelation 19:1-2a)

- A song of praise, directed to God, for his justice.

Song 15

Hallelujah!
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!
(Revelation 19:6-7)

- A song of praise to God.
- It also has a unique feature. Look at the last two lines. They are the only lines of all the songs in Revelation that mention ourselves. And the thought behind them is simply that we should (a) be happy and (b) give God glory.

Summarising the Ten Revelation Songs:

Song No.	Scripture Ref.	Themes
6	4:8b	God's holiness, omnipotence, eternal nature.
7	4:11	Praise to God as Lord; God as Creator of all
8	5:9-10	Praise to Jesus – worthy to open the seals because of his sacrificial death; for giving us royalty, making us priests.
9	5:12	Praise to Jesus the Lamb; worthy of all honour.
10	5:13b	Eternal praise to God on the throne and Jesus the Lamb
11	7:10	Salvation attributed, again, to God on the throne and Jesus the Lamb.
12	7:12	All glory belongs to God forever.
13	15:3-4	After defeating the beast the honour and praise is given to God alone.
14	19:1-2a	Praise, directed to God for his justice.
15	19:6-7	Praise to God and encouragement for the redeemed to praise him.

If you run your eye down the themes of that list you see that heaven dwellers have a fixation on God and Jesus - they are gloriously one-eyed. Only the last half of the last song has even a slight variation. Remember again, these saints have a far better perspective than we do.

Having begun with a clean slate for the development of our worship model, we can now confidently place the songs Paul gave us and the songs of Revelation in centre stage, and go on from there.

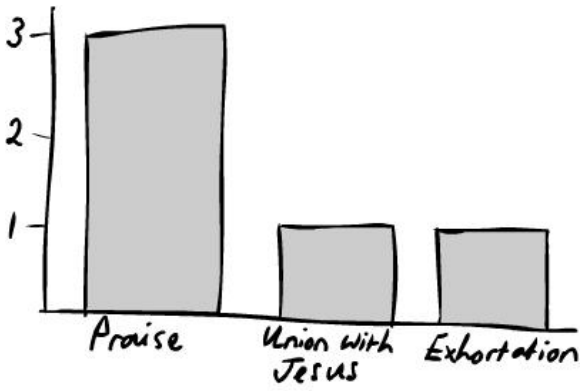
How Much Praise is in New Testament Songs?

In chapter four our analysis of worship words revealed that praise is by far the most common worship term in the Bible.

For comparison we can quantify these figures as a percentage:

Praise (combined)	547	*63%*
Rejoicing	219	25%
Worship	100	12%

How does our *NT song analysis* compare to this? *Paul's* five songs had:



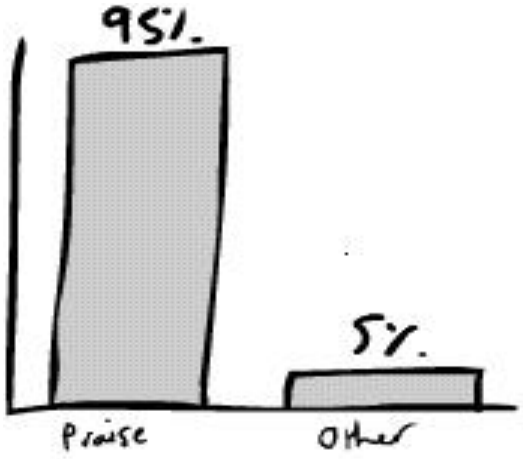
THE SONGS PAUL QUOTED

- ***Three*** praise songs extolling Jesus and all he is and does **(60%)**
- ***One*** song celebrating our union with Jesus. **(20%)**
- ***One*** song of exhortation **(20%)**

There it is on the bar chart.

And once again, praise is way up there.

Next, remembering our definition of praise you will notice that the *Revelation* songs are *all* songs of praise. (With only one tiny exception as noted.) The bar chart is compelling.



SONGS IN REVELATION

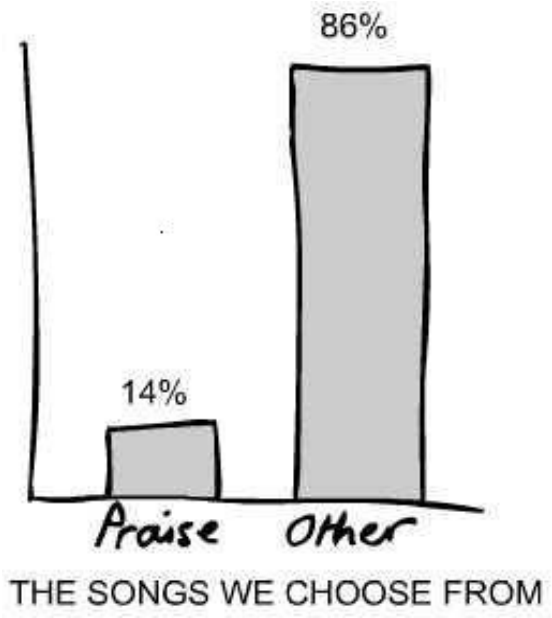
So we have three models for quantifying praise in the Bible:

- Word count gives us 63%
- Paul's songs give us 60%
- Revelation songs give us 95%

Of course they are not exactly the same - this is not rocket science! The important observation is that **praise is unmistakably predominant!**

The question now begs for an answer: *How do contemporary songs match up with these biblical models?* The answer is: *not very well!*

For example I went through 24 CDs (about 288 songs) from a variety of sources and found *only 41 praise songs*. (That is, songs predominantly focused on the attributes or works of God.) That is *only 14%* or *one song in every seven.* Look at the bar chart:



This is *DREADFUL!* We should sing *MOSTLY* praise songs but resources are mostly *NOT* praise songs!!! Honestly, when I gathered these statistics I was shocked.

Obviously songwriters need to get busy, but I am realistic enough to know that this book is not going to revolutionise every songwriter out there. The rubber hits the road with worship leaders and pastors. When choosing songs you must be **very selective**. You have to go **searching** for praise songs. If you don't you will have a **deficiency** of praise songs and the result will be **noodles, noodles, noodles!!!**

However, being selective and choosing predominately God focused praise songs, worship leaders can stimulate true solid praise which, as we shall see, will have a profound effect on worship and the response from God**.**

NEXT: We will dissect praise, consider implications and look at some song examples.