Phôs Hilaron, or *Gladsome Light*
a song of the ancient Church
translated by John R. Rose

O gladsome light of holy glory
From deathless Father heavenly, holy
Blessed one, O Jesus Christ:

We come to sunset and we see
'Tis time to raise our twilight hymn.

We sing to Father and to Son
To Holy Ghost; we sing to God.

And worthy art Thou in all times
That ceaseless hymns should sound Thy praise.

O Son of God, 'tis life Thou givest;
So gives the world to Thee its glory.

Some people are fortunate enough to have grown up with this hymn. I learned it from a book, but it found its way into my heart. The book was John McGuckin's *At the Lighting of the Lamps – Hymns of the Ancient Church*. McGuckin provides original Greek (and Latin) texts paired with fresh translations. Puzzling over his presentation of *Phôs Hilaron*, I realized I was looking through a poetic window into the hearts of fellow Christians of eighteen centuries ago. I decided to try my hand at translating their beloved hymn, and setting it to music. I now see that this hymn has been living like this continually over the ages, in many settings and translations.

Because the Greek is both simple and ambiguous (in a poetic way), it is easy to pick out the words and hard to translate. I tried to give it in English a compact and epigrammatic style like that of the original. To strengthen the sense of antiquity with an echo from Beowulf and the Riders of Rohan, I used alliterative verse. The King James English helps too, and contributes useful pronouns. I tried to be completely literal and avoid "explanatory" or "spiritual" words. That said, I bent my rules in some places, in order to make the lines flow better, so they could be sung. To let the reader judge how far I succeeded, I have given (below) an interlinear presentation of the original text in a column to the right of the translation.

It is worth pausing to think how this poem treats evening as a special occasion. In our days, sundown is a throwaway moment when we flip a switch to continue our business, uninterrupted. But in pre-electric times, the activity of the sun caused natural breaks in each day. Flames had to be kindled with care, and activities which required full daylight had to stop. The small world of man's business was once subject to the cosmic rhythm of the sun.

Spiritually, it was natural to meditate, as this hymn does, on mankind's even deeper dependency on the sun's Creator. (We who force the buried sunshine of ancient eons into electric wires to light our homes at night: Might we also meditate on the ultimate source of that

light?) As the sun gives light to the world, God—specifically, God the Son—gives life to the whole world. And the world reflects back its brightness.

The hymn also differs from many modern songs in the way it budgets its words. It is a doxology, an outpouring of appreciation, flowing in a small river of nouns and adjectives, mostly referring to and addressing the Divine Listener. The apostle Paul goes on like this in his letters sometimes, when he is struck by the majesty of God. The impatient reader will wait for Paul to get back to earth, and resume his "real" point. This hymn has a similar trajectory. Our observation of the sun's setting and the closing in of twilight are briefly sketched in one or two lines in the middle. These give an earthly and human anchor for the main business of the hymn, a meditation on eternal things.

Unlike much poetry, this poem shows little ego. Specifically, there is no "I" or "me". The Greek has exactly *one* first-person verb, and it is plural: "We sing a hymn" (*hymoumen*). The grammar implies subsidiary actions by "we", "coming to the day's end" and "seeing the evening light", all supporting the primary action of singing. In the climax of the poem, "we" modestly recede into the background, as a part of the created world, and the focus is on the exchange of glory between the Creator and His world (*kosmos*).

I enjoy the hymn's gentle insistence on orthodox Christianity. The Father and Son are named multiple times. The initial address to the Son is by his incarnate name, Jesus Christ. The Greek is awkward at times as it juggles all the names. The object of the key verb "we sing" is God, but God's name is prefixed with the biblical formula for the Trinity, and so the words are run together: "we sing hymns to—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—God". That is a translation challenge! Even if the English has to be smoothed off a little, the awkwardness of the Greek sends a distinct signal, that heaven is a full house.

There is a persistent accusation against orthodox trinitarian Christianity, to the effect that it is a corruption of some more authentic version of the faith. The corruption is often assigned to the mid-300's and the Emperor Constantine, who (supposedly) co-opted the leadership of the church and forced them to redesign the faith for worldly empire. But the *Phôs Hilaron* bears witness against this error. Like many other treasures from the ancient Church, it predates the Church's time of respectability. It comes from the times of Diocletian and before, when bishops were still being martyred and Christians had no temptation to flatter the worldly powers. As we admire the heroism of the apostolic co-authors of the New Testament, we can also admire and learn from the Christians of the first three centuries. They held to a supernatural faith, even to the shedding of their blood. This song is part of our inheritance from them. It is easy to imagine it being sung quietly behind closed doors, for fear of the the police.

Part of the poetic charm of the *Phôs Hilaron* is the exploration of light and its many effects. Remember that this song was sung as the sun's light had disappeared from the evening sky, and was replaced by the feebler lamps of the vesper service and the home. The very first word is "light" (*phôs*). This word is repeated in the middle as "evening light" (*phôs hesperinon*). The language about the sun also evokes the idea of light. The sun is depicted, not as a triumphant god, but as a changeable being that has just departed from the sky. Likewise, the earthly light belongs to the evening, as opposed to God's absolute and "joyful" light. This joyful light is "heavenly" (*ouranios*), which literally means "in the sky". (In Greek, there is only one common word for both "sky" and "heaven".) Thus, both the spiritual and natural aspects are directed upward, and towards the light.

The poetry uses another Greek term which touches on the esthetic aspects of light. The term "glory" appears at both ends of the song. The first reference (an adjective *doxês*) is to God's glory. The last (a verb *doxazei*) describes the glory offered in response by Creation. As we use

the term, “glory” is usually accompanied by light. Glorious things are shining or colorful; glorious deeds are also called brilliant or splendid.

In Greek, the word for glory is related primarily to the process of seeing and knowing. If a thing “seems” good, or a person “deems” the thing good, that Greek root (*dok-*) is likely to be in play. From this arises other notions of appearance, reputation, honor, and finally glory. I believe this group of concepts is deeply related to light, if only because light is the principal medium by which we see and know. Somehow, light and glory work well together.

Another fundamental theme touched by the *Phôs Hilaron* is that of time versus eternity. The sun moves across the sky and departs, shaping our day. Meanwhile, God is untouched by death (*athanatos*), and free of sorrow (*makaros*). The poetry connects the two states by calling God worthy in all times and events (*kairoi*) of receiving the sound of praise from His world.

Finally, this constellation of themes (light, glory, time, eternity) also includes the fundamental idea of life (*zoê*). The poetry says to the Son of God, that because You give life to the world, the world gives back its own praise and glory to You. This is a very Christian use of these basic terms. In the background of the *Phôs Hilaron* is the sublime poetry of the Fourth Gospel, which surveys the same constellation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made through Him… In Him was life and that life was the light of mankind. The light shines in the darkness… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The *Phôs Hilaron* reminds us of a heaven of light, life, and glory, a world that also touches our own earthly sphere and shares itself with us. May we aspire to such light, invite Him into our homes and hearts, and share back the glory.

Appendix: Interlinear Presentation

O gladsome light	Φῶς ἱλαρὸν light joyful *(acc)*
of holy glory	ἁγίας δόξης of-holy glory *(gen)*
From deathless Father	ἀθανάτου Πατρός, of-immortal Father *(gen)*
heavenly, holy	οὐρανίου, ἁγίου, of-heavenly holy *(gen)*
Blessed one,	μάκαρος, blessed *(gen)*
O Jesus Christ:	Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, Jesus Christ *(voc)*
We come to sunset	ἐλθόντες ἐπὶ τὴν ἡλίου δύσιν, coming upon the sun setting,

and we see	ἰδόντες seeing
‘Tis time to raise	φῶς ἑσπερινόν, light evening
our twilight hymn.	ὑμνοῦμεν we-hymn (we-sing)
We sing to Father	Πατέρα, Father *(acc)*
and to Son	Υἱόν, Son *(acc)*
To Holy Ghost;	καὶ ἅγιον Πνεῦμα, and holy Spirit *(acc)*
we sing to God.	Θεόν. God *(acc)*
And worthy art Thou	Ἄξιόν σε worthy thee
in all times	ἐν πᾶσι καιροῖς in all occasions
That ceaseless hymns	ὑμνεῖσθαι, to-be-hymned (to-be-sung-of)
should sound Thy praise.	φωναῖς αἰσίαις sounds praise *(dative)*
O Son of God,	Υἱὲ Θεοῦ, Son of-God *(voc/gen)*
‘tis life Thou givest;	ζωὴν ὁ διδούς· life which thou-givest
So gives the world	διὸ ὁ κόσμος thus the world
to Thee its glory.	σὲ δοξάζει thee glorifies