

The First Hymn – a documentary

I recently went to watch the new documentary *The First Hymn*. It had a limited Cinema release in late July 2025. You may be aware of the story of the project.

Professor John Dickson was the catalyst for **The First Hymn Project** based around his interest in seeing a fragment of papyrus known as P.Oxy 1786 (part of a very large collection of papyri) introduced to the church today for its significance as the earliest example of an early Christian hymn to be discovered (from the third century). John's profile through the *Undeceptions* podcast, and wider experience in bringing to life ancient stories and wisdom for a contemporary audience is apposite. He is an enthusiastic host and presenter, combining his academic credentials with interviewing and communication skills. Some readers will remember a previous historical excursion series, *The Christ Files*.

Well-known singers and composers American Chris Tomlin and Australian Ben Fielding are the practitioners connected with John Dickson and tasked with bringing life to the remnant words of the old hymn, including interpreting it for a modern audience.

There are excellent interviews with experts in their field to highlight aspects of not only the textual aspects of papyri and this particular hymn record, but Christian singing and worship. It is an excellent production, filmed on location in four countries. Sydney (John's hometown), Egypt (including Oxyrhynchus where the papyri were discovered), Oxford, Chicago, and Nashville, where the production and development of the hymn takes place in professional recording places connected to the Christian contemporary music scene. Nashville also connects the hymn with Coptic worship through a local Coptic Church. Overall, the different versions of the final song provide a testimony to the creative team undergirded by God's creativity.

It is not surprising that there is connection with Chicago, as this is the location of Wheaton College, where John Dickson holds the Jean Kvamme Distinguished Chair of Biblical Studies and Public Christianity. Wheaton is a Christian liberal arts college, and has a significant music academy, and is well able to provide the professional interpretative and singing base for the hymn. Wheaton is also a beautiful college campus and houses among other significant endeavours, the Billy Graham Museum.

Interestingly, any reference to Hillsong is minimal, though, in hearing some of the hymn version, I could not help to be reminded of another significant Christian song from an ancient text *This I Believe (The Creed)*, co-written by Ben Fielding.

The documentary is:

- Part detective story
- Part music video and road trip
- Part travelogue
- Part historical analysis
- Part theological treatise about singing and worship (and the Trinity);

and I found enjoyable, educative and inspiring.

This documentary will be a good resource for a small group, and particularly helpful for those who are not aware of the wider story of Christianity and its history. In this ahistorical age, it is helpful to be reminded of God's providence over time, and that we are not the centre today, even if we have over 200 forms of social media and musical streaming on call.

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