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1

Distant voices: Ambrose to Watts

My song is love unknown,
  my Saviour's love to me,
love to the loveless shown,
  that they might lovely be.
    O who am I,
      that for my sake
      my Lord should take
    frail flesh and die?

Samuel Crossman

Distant voices: Ambrose to Watts

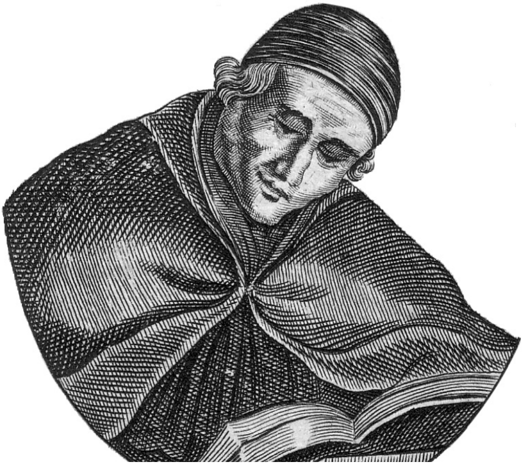
Without doubt the people of God have always had cause to sing—for song is the natural medium of expression of a heart moved by deep feelings—and who has more reason to sing than the man or woman who knows the living God, the joy of forgiven sin, and the certainty of a life to come when sorrow, pain and failure will be things of the past? Old Testament believers marked God's mighty acts of deliverance from their enemies in song: Moses and the children of Israel sang on the banks of the Red Sea in recognition of their miraculous escape from Egypt; Hannah praised God in song for answer to her earnest prayer; the Psalms are packed with hymns of praise to God written by David, Asaph and others commemorating God's dealings with his people. And in the New Testament believers had yet more cause to sing: Mary poured out her thanksgiving to God as she contemplated his mercies to his people through the child she would bear. The early church sang hymns, and snatches of some of the words can be found in the letters written to the churches by the apostle Paul.[1] And one day the whole redeemed church of Jesus

Christ will join in one great anthem of praise—the song of Moses and of the Lamb.

The story of the development of the English hymn is a long one, and in 1892 a hymnologist, Dr John Julian, took more than 1600 pages of close print with double columns to cover it satisfactorily.[2] And that was before what some have called 'the hymn explosion' of the last half of the twentieth century, when countless new writers added their voices to the songs of the church. However, in order to appreciate the work of those hymn-writers whose lives we have chosen to follow in these pages, it will help to know something of the story of the development of the English hymn—that foundation on which their endeavours were built.[3] Confining ourselves to those whose work was either written in English or appears in translation in our hymn books, a quick glance will reveal a number whose lives predated our first subject, Isaac Watts, some by many centuries.

Ambrose of Milan

Possibly the earliest of our hymn-writers of the Christian era whose hymns are still sung today is Ambrose of Milan who lived in the fourth century (339–397). Initially Ambrose practised law in Milan, but in 374, at the young age of thirty-four, was made Bishop of Milan—and this by popular acclaim, even though he was only a 'catechumen' undergoing instruction prior to being baptized. It was a recognition by the people both of his sincere faith and godly life, and the knowledge that he was probably the only one who could stem the tide of Arianism that was sweeping the churches. As bishop, Ambrose had a significant and important ministry; under his preaching Augustine, whose wayward youth had brought his mother Monica near to despair, was converted. Far-sighted and with a deep concern for those who gathered to hear his preaching, Ambrose also made a noteworthy contribution to the development of hymns. Called 'the father of the church song' he encouraged congregational singing of both psalms and hymns. Almost one



Ambrose of Milan

hundred hymns were originally ascribed to him but it is likely that only twelve were actually his work. Despite the revolution in English usage that has been part of the cultural change of recent years, two of Ambrose's own hymns can still be found in modern hymnals, one of them translated by Charles Wesley. Better known is 'O Jesus, Lord of heavenly grace', a morning hymn translated variously more than twenty times from the same Latin original. One version includes the following words:

> O Jesus, Lord of heavenly grace,
> thou brightness of thy Father's face,
> thou fountain of eternal light,
> whose beams disperse the shades of night;
>
> Come, holy Sun of heavenly love,
> shower down thy radiance from above,
> and to our inmost hearts convey
> the Holy Spirit's cloudless ray.[4]

The effect of Ambrose's attempt to introduce hymns into services of worship was short-lived, however, and even Augustine frowned on the practice.

Bernard of Cluny

Many other hymns were written over the following eight centuries but few have survived. Venantius Fortunatus was a sixth-century poet, but his work is little known today. Not until we reach the twelfth century do we find ourselves back on familiar ground with extracts from Bernard of Cluny's three-thousand-line Latin poem on the glories of the heavenly country. Distressed by the evils he witnessed in the world around him, Bernard, who lived in Brittany, retreated to a monastery, but was soon to discover that even there the wickedness of the human heart found plenty of opportunity for expression. His mind turned with longing to the world to come where sin is banished for ever. John Neale[5] translated selected verses from his poem which have been made into two or three separate hymns, the best known being 'Jerusalem the Golden'. The first verse of Neale's translation picks up Bernard's frame of mind:

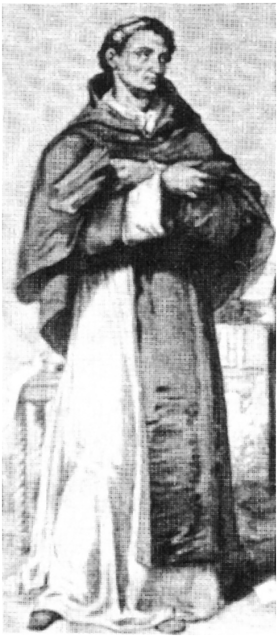
> The world is very evil,
>   the times are waxing late;
> be sober and keep vigil,
>   the Judge is at the gate …

We catch the poet's longing for that 'sweet and blessed country' as he writes:

> I know not, O I know not
>   what joys await us there,
> what radiancy of glory,
>   what bliss beyond compare …
>
> Jesus in mercy bring us
>   to that dear land of rest,
> who art, with God the Father
>   and Spirit, ever blest!

Bernard of Clairvaux

Contemporary with Bernard of Cluny was another Bernard,



Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard of Clairvaux[6]—a name familiar to many because of the hymns attributed to him. He too was a French monk, and a man of outstanding ability. He set up a monastery in a desolate and forsaken valley known as the 'Valley of Wormwood' and by years of toil and self-sacrifice transformed the area until it became known as the 'Valley of Light' (or 'Clairvaux' in French). Bernard was a man of contrasts; some of his writings and actions were far from attractive, particularly his participation in the second Crusade, but he was primarily a preacher whose main theme in both his writing and preaching was the love and beauties of Christ—a contrast to the religion of fear so widely propagated by the church of the day. Preaching, he insisted, is 'not so much to explain the words as to reach people's hearts'. Martin Luther was a strong admirer of Bernard of Clairvaux because 'he preaches Christ so excellently'. Bernard is thought to be the author of a forty-eight-stanza Latin poem *Jesu dulcis memoria*—a poem extolling the glories of Christ, and called the 'sweetest and most evangelical hymn of the Middle Ages'. One part of this poem, translated by Edward Caswall (1814–78), is the well-known hymn:

> Jesus, the very thought of thee
>   with sweetness fills my breast;
> but sweeter far thy face to see,
>   and in thy presence rest.

Two other portions have also been translated and have found warm acceptance in today's hymn books: 'Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts'[7] is often sung at Communion services:

> We taste thee, O thou living Bread,
>   and long to feast upon thee still;
> we drink of thee, the fountain-head,
>   and thirst our souls from thee to fill.

The last hymn in this trilogy, again translated by Caswall, is once more on the person of Christ, the source and sustainer of true inward religion:

> O Jesus, King most wonderful,
>   thou Conqueror renowned,
> thou sweetness most ineffable,
>   in whom all joys are found.

Although Bernard held tenaciously to many of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, propagating the notion that the virgin Mary could bestow favours because of her special access to her Son, his reliance on the foundation truths of the Christian gospel is demonstrated in a prayer he uttered as he lay dying: 'I have lived wickedly, [but] thou, loving Lord Jesus, hast purchased heaven with thy suffering and death. Thou hast unlocked heaven and presented it to me … in this I have joy and comfort.'

Martin Luther

When Martin Luther came on the scene (1483–1546), and with him the great changes brought in by the Reformation, a new day was introduced in the development of hymn-singing. Luther, called the 'Ambrose of German hymnody', recognized both the importance of the participation of the people in services of worship and the power of the hymn to inspire, instruct and sustain the Christian. 'The hymns of Luther', said one who was deeply opposed to the truths the Reformer was preaching, 'have killed more souls than his sermons.' A hymn book brought out in 1524 contained twenty-three of Luther's hymns, six of which were metrical psalms. This same year saw the martyrdom of two of Luther's young followers, and we may well imagine the effect this would have had on a man of such intense feeling as Martin Luther. It is thought that his moving rendering of Psalm 130, 'From deep distress I cry to thee', was written with such circumstances in mind:

> Though great our sins and sore our woes,
>   his grace much more aboundeth;
> his helping love no limit knows,
>   our utmost need it soundeth;
> our kind and faithful Shepherd he,
> who shall at last set Israel free
>   from all their sin and sorrow.

Conflicting accounts exist as to when Luther composed the greatest of all his hymns, 'A safe stronghold our God is still'—based on Psalm 46. In *Here I Stand,* his important work on the life of Luther, Roland Bainton asserts that it was 1527, a year when another friend was martyred and when the tempestuous preacher experienced periods of depression. At such moments he could be tempted to doubt even the fundamental truths of the faith for which he was contending. Undoubtedly this hymn of confidence in God came straight from the conflict, both personal and on the wider front, as Luther faced fierce papal opposition. But it is more likely that it was composed in 1529 when the German princes entered their great 'Protest'[8] as they finally separated from the Church of Rome, insisting that 'they must *protest* and testify publicly before God that they should do nothing contrary to his Word'. And so Luther wrote:

Martin Luther

God's Word, for all their craft and force,
one moment will not linger,
but, spite of hell, shall have its course;
'tis written by his finger.
And though they take our life,
goods, honour, children, wife,
yet is their profit small:
these things shall vanish all;
the city of God remaineth.

The hymns which Luther composed for his children each Christmas time demonstrate the tenderness of this rugged Reformer. 'From heaven above to earth I come' was composed for five-year-old Hans, and includes these words:

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy child,
make thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
within my heart that it may be
a quiet chamber fit for thee.[9]

John Calvin

While Luther wrote some thirty-seven hymns altogether and set a firm tradition of congregational singing in the Lutheran churches, John Calvin took a different position. Like Luther he also favoured the use of metrical psalms for congregational singing, and in 1539 had published a collection for such a purpose. Unlike Luther, however, he was unhappy about the use of words other than those of Scripture in the worship of God, although he was not as rigid on the issue as some of his followers. One beautiful hymn has even been attributed to him:

I greet thee who my sure Redeemer art,
my only trust and Saviour of my heart,
who pain didst undergo for my poor sake:
I pray thee from our hearts all cares to take.

Sternhold and Hopkins

Many of the exiles from Britain who fled from Queen Mary's cruel regime found a haven in Calvin's Geneva; and among them was the Scottish Reformer, John Knox. When these spiritual leaders, deeply influenced by Calvin's emphasis, returned home at the accession of Elizabeth I, they implemented the singing of only metrical psalms in their churches. This became the order of the day in Britain for at least one hundred and fifty years. Thomas Sternhold, a one-time groom in the court of Henry VIII, had been the first to work on a metrical version of the Psalms—a far cry from the bawdy songs usually sung at court. When the young Edward VI heard the courtier's 'holye songes' as he played them on his own organ, he was delighted, and it was to the boy-king that the former courtier dedicated his first collection of psalms, which he published in 1549.

Sternhold died soon afterwards and his friend John Hopkins, a Suffolk country parson, took up his work. He gathered together thirty-seven of Sternhold's renderings, added a further seven of his own and had them printed in 1551. A number of editions appeared over the next ten years, each adding new psalms and other modifications until in 1562 an expanded selection of these ballad-style arrangements was published, this time including a further twenty-four by William Kethe and a number by William Whittingham. It bore a long title, generally abbreviated to *The Whole Booke of Psalmes.*

Although John Wesley referred to the *Old Version* (the name that would be given to this collection) as 'wretched, scandalous doggerel', there was merit in the work. Through the metrical psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins, English church worshippers became familiar with congregational singing in their own language and learnt to appreciate the value of metre and rhyme in religious verse. They also became accustomed to untangling the inverted lines which Sternhold and Hopkins would use in