

# NINETEEN CENTURIES OF CHRISTIAN SONG

BY  
EDWARD S. NINDE, D.D.

FOREWORD BY  
MARY NINDE GAMEWELL



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To  
MISS EMILY S. PERKINS  
FOUNDER OF  
THE HYMN SOCIETY OF AMERICA



## FOREWORD

**M**Y BROTHER'S interest in hymnody began in his college days at Wesleyan University, and continued with growing intensity through life. Never allowing this study to interfere with his regular pastoral work, he made it his hobby, to which he turned from time to time for relaxation. Knowing this, I was not surprised, in looking over his papers after his death, to find voluminous notes on his favorite theme taken from various sources in many libraries in this country and Great Britain.

He had once said to me that he planned to write a book on general hymnody, calling it "Nineteen Centuries of Christian Song," and making it much ampler and more inclusive than his work on "The Story of the American Hymn," published in 1921. His failing health, however, led me to think he had abandoned this purpose; so it was almost by accident that I found the material which is in the present volume. I now fully believe he wrote this abbreviated story out of an innate love for the study of hymnody which he could not resist, and with no idea whatever of publication. Yet, as I read the notes, they seemed to me to possess interest and value, not so much for those quite familiar with the history of hymnody as for others only slightly acquainted with the subject.

Many, no doubt, feel an interest in hymns who would not be apt to turn to a detailed, technical account for information. To this class—particularly to alert young people—the present brief, simple account of the development of Christian song may have an appeal, and it is solely with this hope in mind that the story is published. My brother's notes give clear indication of his thorough familiarity with the hymns of the Oxford Movement and of those that followed in the



nineteenth century. Had he been able to carry out his original plan I am confident this part of the hymnic story would have received from him full and adequate treatment.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Carl F. Price for his kindness in reading and editing the manuscript and in advising in all matters pertaining to its publication.

Too much cannot be said of the help given by my husband, without whose sympathetic cooperation this work could not have been done.

MARY NINDE GAMEWELL.

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*Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

Jesus came to earth in an outburst of song. He entered his Passion chanting a hymn. Through life he was a lover of song, and it is fitting that his followers should be a singing people.



# I

## HYMNS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

**M**AKING MELODY—to the Lord” was perfectly natural to the early Christians; they inherited the practice from a long line of Hebrew sires. We read of the rapturous Song of Deliverance which Moses and the men of Israel uttered after the passage of the Red Sea, when, to the accompaniment of timbrel and dance, Miriam and her women joined in with the refrain:

Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously;  
The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.

In a similar strain Deborah and Barak sang of their victory over the mighty Sisera.

When Hannah, the mother of Samuel, looked into the face of her newborn babe, she broke into a hymn of gratitude to God: “My heart rejoiceth in the Lord;—I rejoice in thy salvation.”

In a far different key sounds the noble dirge which David uttered for Saul and Jonathan: “The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen!”

It is, however, in that treasury of song, the Book of Psalms, that we find the most remarkable collection of sacred lyrics of any age or of any tongue. Scarcely possible is it to overestimate their influence on the religious life, not only of the Hebrew people, but also of the Christian Church. Byron spoke truly when he said that “David’s lyre grew mightier than his throne.” For hundreds of years this collection was the hymnal of the Jews, a fountain of spiritual instruction and comfort that never failed. It was a book that Jesus knew and loved, from which he sang and whose blessed words he often quoted. On that last night, when he met the Twelve in the upper chamber in Jerusalem, as he was about to pass into the darkness, he led the little com-

pany in a hymn. No doubt it was the group of Psalms 115-118, being the second part of the Hallel or Song of Praise, which the Jews were in the habit of chanting at the Passion meal.

From this noble heritage of ancient song, it was a natural and easy transition to the still more exalted hymnody of the Christian era. In celebrating the advent of the King, how beautiful and appropriate that men should join with angels in praise to God! The united minstrelsy of heaven and earth was none too glorious for such a time as this.

No wonder that when the young virgin of Nazareth received the marvelous tidings that she, of all the daughters of Israel, had been chosen to be the mother of the long-expected Messiah, she cried in ecstasy:

My soul doth magnify the Lord,  
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

As if in answering echo, came the exultant strain from the unsealed lips of Zacharias, the aged priest, as he took in his arms the infant John:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;  
For he hath visited and redeemed his people.

But sublimest of all was the hymn of the heavenly host on the first Christmas night:

Glory to God in the highest,  
And on earth peace, good will toward men.

Then, like a gracious benediction to their jubilant service of advent song, there fall upon our ears the words of the patriarchal Simeon:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
According to thy word;  
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation.

These four hymns, known by their Latin names, the "Magnificat," the "Benedictus," the "Gloria in Excelsis" and the "Nunc Dimittis," very early found their way into the service of the Church, and have been in well-nigh uni-

versal use from that time to this. They help to remind us that, with all our divisions and differences, fundamentally the followers of Jesus are one.

The primitive Church had no distinctively Christian hymn book; and yet, both in private and in public worship, large use was made of religious song. Paul especially delighted in it, for he knew its value. On that memorable night when he and Silas lay in the dungeon at Philippi, feet in the stocks, backs bleeding, victims of cruel injustice, we can well imagine that it was the great apostle who proposed that they comfort their hearts by singing hymns; and no wonder, as the joyous notes rang out, "the prisoners were listening." Doubtless they caught at least a part of the meaning, for, as Paul once wrote to the Christians in Corinth, he had made it a practice to "sing with the understanding," so that people might know what he was saying. He likewise urged his fellow believers to make use of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." Probably he had in mind parts from the temple and synagogue service, with which every convert from Judaism would be familiar, and also simple hymns of Christian origin that already were beginning to appear among the disciples.

Scattered through the New Testament are sentences in rhythmic form which may be fragments of early Christian hymns. For example, it has been surmised that the lines,

Awake, thou that sleepest,  
And arise from the dead,  
And Christ shall give thee light (Ephesians 5. 14),

are a part of a baptismal hymn. And in describing the "mystery of godliness" Paul seems to be quoting from an early saying or hymn:

Manifest in the flesh,  
Justified in the Spirit,  
Seen of angels,  
Preached unto the Gentiles,  
Believed on in the world,  
Received up into glory. (I Timothy 3. 16)



In the Book of Revelation there occur a number of rhythmic passages which quite likely were sung by the early Christians, such as the "Song of Moses and of the Lamb":

Great and marvelous are thy works,  
 O Lord God the Almighty!  
 Righteous and true are thy ways,  
 Thou King of the ages.  
 Who shall not fear, O Lord,  
 And glorify thy name?  
 For thou only art holy;  
 For all the nations shall come  
 And worship before thee;  
 For thy righteous acts  
 Have been made manifest. (Revelation 15. 3, 4.)

It is interesting to find that outside of the New Testament, the earliest response to singing among the Christians comes not from one of their own number, but from a Roman official. In the year 109 A.D., during the reign of the Emperor Trajan, and not long after the death of the Apostle John, Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor. In one of his first reports he told the emperor of his contact with the curious sect of the Christians, and of how he had been solemnly assured that their worst offense was *in gathering before dawn on an appointed day*—no doubt Sunday—to sing in responsive fashion hymns to Christ as God. This brief allusion is of great importance not only as indicating the rapid spread of the Church, but also the prominent place of song and the manner of singing in Christian worship. Of those early hymns no definite trace remains, but we may readily suppose that they were similar to the rhythmic sentences already quoted. Doubtless disciples were often moved to express themselves in forms of praise and thanksgiving which could be used in the simple services of those primitive days.

Looking back to the opening Christian centuries, our attention is at once attracted to a small group of hymns which are in a class by themselves. Like commanding peaks, they tower above their fellows, bathed in the glory of the