

Introduction to Volume 1

From Asia Minor to Western Europe

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HYMNS THAT ASSEMBLIES OF Christians sing at worship over extended periods of time are durable expressions. Though they may come from another time and place, they are accessible and meaningful when and where they are sung. Hymns that do not meet these requirements ultimately fall by the wayside. Most worshipers do not know, nor for a hymn to be meaningful do they need to know, what a hymn's sources or history might be. They can sing hymns happily and meaningfully without such knowledge. A few interested people, including but not limited to experts, read handbooks or other hymnic studies. (These few sometimes become a larger group—more about that later.) They discover that a hymn which may be perceived as a simple unitary expression is in fact complex, even if it is recent. Hymns as a group multiply the complexity. The writers of the articles in this volume sort out some of that complexity over the first fifteen centuries of the church's history.

Hymns are not simple things. They are written by human beings in their contexts. They may grow out of specific occasions in those contexts, but those occasions and contexts are contextualized by the Christian faith and its festivals that transcend them. Hymns are used by communities at worship who often modify them. The original writers may modify their own work, and then various communities in historical succession may make further modifications. Finding an “original” may not be easy, and the source may be anonymous. If an “original” is found, it may not be as important as an edited version the church has used, adapted, and adopted.

Strictly speaking, a hymn is a text, usually a poetic one. Since the church has lived in many cultures, times, and places, with many languages and translations from language to language, all of the issues associated with poetry in those languages are in play. Are there stanzaic structures? Are there a like number of lines in each stanza if there are stanzas? Are there poetic feet, accentuation, poetic devices like alliteration? What happens to any or all of these when translations occur? The nature of poetry in a general sense is present here, but it is somewhat unique for a hymn. To use English as an example, a hymn is not a Shakespearean sonnet, nor is it a nursery rhyme. It lives between those extremes. It has to be accessible and understandable in some immediate ways, but to remain in the hymnic repertoire it requires levels of meaning that endure and reveal themselves over long stretches of time to worshipers from all walks of life, not simply to experts.

A hymn is usually sung, so musical matters are involved. The tune must be accessible to people who are not musicians, but it also has to be durable and not a superficial flash in the pan, since it gets repeated over many years. If a hymn is stanzaic, the tune gets repeated for each stanza. Bad crafting will not stand up to that kind of repeated usage. Further, the tune has to have integrity on its own, but it also has to fit a text. Since tunes may get used for multiple texts, additional complications arise.

Hymns do not only remain in their native state as the songs of the people, most of whom are not musicians and sing at worship without practice. Hymns and their tunes get arranged by composers in more or less complicated settings that amateur or professional musicians practice in choirs. In actual usage a simple congregational version and more complex choral settings of it often get used together—alternated stanza by stanza or in other configurations between the assembly and the choir. Additionally, the arrangements may be used as anthems or other pieces at worship. Sometimes, perhaps to highlight a given theme, these may substitute for the congregation's singing. And they may be used outside of worship in concerts or other venues where audiences listen as spectators rather than participate as worshipers.

Stories and other snatches from this massive hymnic complexity become known, and bits of information come to light in various ways. A preacher may reference a hymn and explain something about it. A worshiper may discover a perplexing piece of intelligence in the brief information given about a hymn on the page of a hymnal. Someone may read something about a hymn that begs for additional detail. All of this stimulates worshipers to ask questions and to want to know more. The few individuals interested in knowing about hymnic sources and origins now become a larger group that requests a class about hymnody. A teacher from a college

or seminary is invited to lead a forum about it. At the end of the forum a common refrain often arises in the form of a question: “Why didn’t anyone tell us about this before?”

There is no easy answer to that question, but a contributing factor is the warfare Catholics and Protestants have experienced. This has produced a strange but relentless notion that “everybody knows,” namely, that there was no congregational singing in the church before the sixteenth century, that Martin Luther started hymn singing, and that he raided bars for his hymn tunes. This modern urban legend leads to hymns perceived as sixteenth or post-sixteenth century expressions of piety, but with little or nothing of interest beyond that. Coupled to this perception is the assumption that there is nothing to study before the sixteenth century. It is as if everything you read about in this volume never happened.

But it did happen. This volume gives you convenient access to some of the things that happened and to many of hymnody’s fascinating facets before the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. A list of some of these things gives a sense of the scope of this volume in a quick overview. Here are insights into:

- How the Bible, the Psalms, and canticles like the *Magnificat* underpin and permeate this study;
- how hymns, like the Psalms, have expressed the whole of life before God—with rejoicing, lament, praise, prayer, proclamation, pastoral care, teaching, ethics, the pilgrim journey;
- how hymns evolved and developed over fifteen centuries in many places, both East and West;
- how important are creeds and theological affirmations for hymnody;
- how important are the assembly’s refrains and acclamations like *Kyrie eleison* and *Alleluia*;
- how many languages are involved;
- how individuals, monastic institutions, schools, parish churches, and cathedrals are part of this history;
- how cycles of hymns developed;
- how oral and written sources come into play;
- how hymns have been influenced by, but in the final analysis not defined by the perceptions and interests of people at any specific times and places;
- how many hymns there are;

- how hymns have related to the liturgy;
- how the line between what is congregational and what is choral is porous and cannot be narrowly defined;
- how popular piety and icons, specifically, for example, in the Iconoclastic Controversy, have related to hymnody;
- how hymns have related to polyphony and were developed into sophisticated sets and settings;
- how anonymous and well-known, skilled and less-skilled authors and composers have contributed texts and tunes;
- how texts and music have related to one another;
- how the Eastern church, though it eschewed musical instruments, nonetheless sometimes employed instrument-like nonsense syllables—parallel perhaps to the melismatic jubilus in the West on the final “a” of *Alleluia*—which point to the push of the Christian message to sonic realities beyond the reach of rationality and words; and
- how Martin Luther and those who followed him were indebted to and built on what they received.

There is much detailed information in these pages. Like all of history—here the history of hymnody in particular—details do not always move in an orderly fashion. Sometimes the lay of the land comes into sight relatively easily. Sometimes the outlines of the larger picture are less clear. Sometimes the data is dense with terms that, especially to Western readers, are foreign. Plenty of bibliographical material is provided for those who want to pursue this study in order to gain further clarity about what may not be immediately apparent.

This volume is not meant to tell you everything about hymnody in the first fifteen centuries, but it will give you a remarkable introduction to an important part of the church’s history that is often hidden from view. Enjoy the delight the editors and writers have provided.