

GREEK AND SYRIAC HYMNS

The Oldest Christian Hymn

*Shepherd of tender youth,
Guiding in love and truth
Through devious ways;
Christ, our triumphant King,
We come Thy name to sing,
And here our children bring
To join Thy praise.*

*Thou art our holy Lord,
O all-subduing Word,
Healer of strife:
Thou didst Thyself abase,
That from sin's deep disgrace
Thou mightest save our race,
And give us life.*

*Ever be near our side,
Our Shepherd and our Guide,
Our staff and song:
Jesus, Thou Christ of God,
By Thine enduring Word,
Lead us where Thou hast trod;
Our faith make strong.*

*So now, and till we die,
Sound we Thy praises high,
And joyful sing:
Let all the holy throng
Who to Thy Church belong
Unite to swell the song
To Christ our King!*

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, about 200 A.D.

Very soon the early Christians began to use hymns other than the Psalms and Scriptural chants. In other words, they began to sing the praises of the Lord in their own words. Eusebius informs us that in the first half of the third century there existed a large number of sacred songs. Some of these have come down to us, but the authorship of only one is known with any

degree of certainty. It is the beautiful children's hymn, "Shepherd of Tender Youth."

Just how old this hymn is cannot be stated with certainty. However, it is found appended to a very ancient Christian work entitled "The Tutor," written in Greek by Clement of Alexandria.

Clement, whose real name was Titus Flavius Clemens, was born about 170 A.D. He was one of the first great scholars in the Christian Church. An eager seeker after truth, he studied the religions and philosophical systems of the Greeks, the Assyrians, Egyptians, and Jews.

In the course of time he entered the Catechetical School conducted by Pantaenus at Alexandria, Egypt, and there he became a convert to Christianity. Some years later Clement himself became the head of the institution, which was the first Christian school of its kind in the world. Among the students who received instruction from Clement was the famous Origen, who became the greatest scholar in the ancient Christian church. Another of his pupils was Alexander, afterwards Bishop of Jerusalem, and still later Bishop of Cappadocia.

One of Clement's most celebrated works was "The Tutor." It was in three volumes. The first book described the Tutor, who is Christ Himself; the second book contained sundry directions concerning the daily life and conduct; and the third, after dwelling on the nature of true beauty, condemned extravagance in dress, on the part of both men and women.

Two poems are appended to this work, the first of which is entitled, "A Hymn to the Saviour." This is the hymn known as "Shepherd of tender youth."

The "Hymn to the Saviour" in all the manuscripts in which it is found is attributed to Clement himself, but some critics believe that he was merely quoting it, and that it was written by a still earlier poet. Be that as it may, we do know that, aside from the hymns derived from the Bible, it is the oldest Christian hymn in existence, and it has always been referred to as "Clement's hymn."

Clement was driven from Alexandria during the persecution of Severus in 202 A.D. Of his subsequent history practically nothing is known. It is believed he died about 220 A.D.

A number of other beautiful Greek hymns have come down to us from the same period, but their date and authorship remain in doubt. Longfellow has given us an exquisite translation of one of these in "The Golden Legend":

O Gladsome Light
Of the Father immortal,
And of the celestial
Sacred and blessed
Jesus, our Saviour!
Now to the sunset

Again hast Thou brought us;
And seeing the evening
Twilight, we bless Thee,
Praise Thee, adore Thee,
Father omnipotent!
Son, the Life-giver!
Spirit, the Comforter!
Worthy at all times
Of worship and wonder!

An inspiring little doxology, also by an unknown author, reads:

My hope is God,
My refuge is the Lord,
My shelter is the Holy Ghost;
Be Thou, O Holy Three, adored!

Doctrinal controversies gave the first real impetus to hymn writing in the Eastern church. As early as the second century, Bardesanes, a Gnostic teacher, had beguiled many to adopt his heresy by the charm of his hymns and melodies. His son, Harmonius, followed in the father's footsteps. Their hymns were written in the Syriac language, and only a few fragments have been preserved.

The Arians and other heretical teachers also seized upon the same method to spread their doctrines. It was not until the fourth century, apparently, that any effort was made by orthodox Christians to meet them with their own weapons. Ephrem Syrus, who has been called "the cithern of the Holy Spirit," was the greatest teacher of his time in the Syrian Church, as well as her most gifted hymnist. This unusual man was born in northern Mesopotamia about 307 A.D. His zeal for orthodox Christianity was no doubt kindled by his presence at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., and thence forth he was ever an eager champion of the faith. Not only did he write hymns and chants, but he trained large choirs to sing them. He exerted a profound influence over the entire Syrian Church, and even today his hymns are used by the Maronite Christians.

The greatest name among the Greek hymnists of this period is Gregory Nazianzen. Born in 325 A.D., the son of a bishop, he was compelled by his father to enter the priesthood at the age of thirty-six years. He labored with much zeal, however, and eventually was enthroned by the Emperor's own hand as Patriarch of Constantinople. Through the machinations of the Arians he was later compelled to abdicate his office, whereupon he retired to his birthplace. Here he spent the last years of his life in writing sacred poetry of singular beauty and lofty spirit.

Another of the important writers of the early Greek period was Anatolius. Concerning this man very little is known except that he lived in the seventh or eighth century. He has left about

one hundred hymns, among them, at least three that are still in common use, "Fierce was the wild billow," "The day is past and over," and "A great and mighty wonder." This last is a little Christmas hymn of unusual charm. His description of the storm of Galilee is one of the classics of Greek hymnology:

Fierce was the wild billow,
Dark was the night;
Oars labored heavily,
Foam glimmered white ;

Trembled the mariners,
Peril was nigh;
Then said the God of God,
"Peace! It is I."

To John of Damascus, who died about 780 A.D., we are indebted for two of the most popular Easter hymns in use today, namely, "The day of resurrection" and "Come, ye faithful, raise the strain." Further reference to these will be found in the chapter on the great translator of Greek and Latin hymns, John Mason Neale.

When John of Damascus forsook the world and left behind him a brilliant career to enter a monastery founded in 520 A.D., by St. Sabas, he took with him his ten-year-old nephew, Stephen. The boy grew up within the walls of this cloister, which is situated in one of the deep gorges of the brook Kedron, near Bethlehem, overlooking the Dead Sea. Stephen, who came to be known as the Sabaite, was likewise a gifted hymnist, and it is he who has given us the hymn made famous by Neale's translation : "Art thou weary, art thou languid?" Stephen died in 794 A.D.

The last name of importance among the great hymn -writers of the Greek Church is that of Joseph the Hymnographer, who lived at Constantinople in the ninth century. It is he who wrote the hymn on angels for St. Michael's Day:

Stars of the morning, so gloriously bright,
Filled with celestial resplendence and light,
These that, where night never followeth day,
Raise the "Thrice Holy, Lord!" ever and aye.

As early as the fourth century the Council of Laodicea had decreed that "besides the appointed singers, who mount the ambo, and sing from the hook, others shall not sing in the church." How far this rule may have discouraged or suppressed congregational singing is a subject of dispute among historians. However, it is a matter of record that hymnody suffered a gradual decline in the Eastern division of the Christian Church and eventually assumed more of a liturgical character.