

# JOHN BROWNLIE

HYMNS OF THE  
GREEK CHURCH

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**Hymns of the Greek Church**

«Public Domain»

**Brownlie J.**

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# **John Brownlie**

## **Hymns of the Greek Church**

### **Translated with Introduction and Notes**

#### **SOME PRESS NOTICES**

*“This work at its best reaches the level of absolute excellence, and the book is entitled to a warm and grateful welcome.” —Record.*

*“Mr Brownlie has taste and a poetic gift, and his verses are easy and natural, rarely, if ever, betraying the fact that they are the work of a translator.” —Church Times.*

*“This dainty volume will certainly enhance his reputation.” —Glasgow Herald.*

*“It brings into dignified Church-English some sixty simple and powerful hymns. The book should prove welcome to men generally interested in hymnody, and particularly to those who are ignorant of the richness of the Greek liturgy.” —Scotsman.*

*“Mr Brownlie has the knack of hymn-writing, and the translations from the Greek which he has published in this book will be a welcome addition to English hymnology.” —Athenaeum.*

*“Mr Brownlie has done eminent service as a hymnologist and translator of hymns. These translations are in smooth and flowing English verse, and the hymns are interesting both on their intrinsic merits and as representing the religious thought and emotion of an important section of the Church.” —Aberdeen Free Press.*

## **PREFATORY NOTE**

After ten years this, the first of five series of hymns of the Greek Church, is issued in cheap form in the hope that those who regard the unity of Christian praise, and wish to realise it, and who seek its enrichment from the Church of the Apostles, may be induced to give the subject that consideration which it deserves, and which has been too long neglected.

The past ten years have seen much activity in the department of Church hymnody, – all sections of the Church have had their hymnals under revision with varied results; but in this particular we are bound to feel satisfaction that the praise literature of the Early and Mediaeval Church has been more fully drawn upon than at any former period, and the Greek Church no longer stands in the background. From this volume alone no fewer than ten renderings have been utilised by hymnal compilers, and they make together twenty appearances. This fact is mentioned to indicate an appreciation of Greek hymnody which, it is hoped, may grow.

*J. B.*

## INTRODUCTION

I. Thirty-eight years ago, Dr. John Mason Neale published his *Hymns of the Eastern Church*, and for the first time English readers were introduced to the priceless gems of Greek hymnody. At the close of his preface he throws out a challenge which, as far as the present writer is aware, has not yet been taken up. He says: ‘And while fully sensible of their imperfections, I may yet, by way of excuse rather than of boast, say, almost in Bishop Hall’s words —

“I first adventure: follow me who list,  
And be the second Eastern Melodist.”

It would be presumptuous to believe that the translations which follow are in any particular a worthy answer to that challenge; but the translator can honestly say that they are a very earnest attempt to acquaint English readers still further with the valuable praise literature which lies buried in the service-books of the Greek Church, and they constitute the first real attempt in that direction since Dr. Neale issued his collection in 1862.

II. The renderings contained in this volume are the product of many happy hours during the past five years. No method was adopted in the work. As the translator waded through the closely printed pages of the Greek offices, what appeared at first sight to be lines worthy of translation were taken up and examined, sometimes to be cast aside again because of some unremovable blemish, at other times to be moulded to the form which they now bear. Of the forty-seven pieces, thirty-five appear for the first time in English verse.

For the original, the translator has gone to the service-books, and for the most part has confined himself to the hymns which are to be found in the Triodion, containing the Lenten services; and in the Pentecostarion, in which are found the hymns for the services of Easter and Pentecost. A few specimens are also given from other offices, particularly that for Christmas.

Renderings from the work of the earlier Greek hymn-writers are added at the end of this volume; but, unlike the hymns of the Church service-books, these hymns originally are in the classical measures, and illustrate the work of the best Christian poets, who in some cases wrote extensively.

III. It is a very remarkable fact, and certainly not to our credit, that, with the exception of a very few who have made the study a specialty, our educated men show a most unaccountable ignorance of the most attractive and valuable material for praise and prayer contained in the Greek Church service-books. We have learning more than enough, and zeal enough for the pursuit of study in other departments, but this unworked field lies fallow, and no one thinks it worth his while to cultivate it. That the study will reward the student, although not in a material sense – for the meaningless prejudice of the great mass of our people for what is local and against the thought of the stranger, no matter how beautiful it may be, is still to be reckoned with – yet in the highest sense as conferring upon him a new delight, there can be no doubt; for, after the necessary expenditure of patient application, and the passing of the initiatory stages which in every department of study are somewhat trying, the attraction will begin, and the subject become positively fascinating. To any one having the lyrical gift and the necessary qualifications for the study of Greek, those service-books might prove a mine of treasure inexhaustible. In the seventeen quarto volumes which contain the Greek Church offices, there must be material of one kind or another for many thousands of hymns; yet, when hymnal compilers ask for hymns from the Greek for their collections, they are not to be had, save in the few renderings made by Dr. Neale. In the most recently compiled collection for church use — *The Church Hymnary*— only five pieces from the Greek find a place. What a humbling confession! They are the best available from the very small number of translations in our possession, which, perhaps, does not exceed one hundred and fifty pieces in all.

We have not treated the Latin Church after that fashion. There is not a hymn of real merit in the Latin which has not been translated, and in not a few cases oftener than once; with the result that the gems of Latin hymnody are the valued possession of the Church in all English-speaking lands.

IV. One does not proceed far before making some discoveries which may account, to a certain extent, for the neglect of Greek hymnody by men who are best qualified to pursue the study of it. The writers are not poets, in the true sense, and their language is not Greek as we have known it.

(1) None of the hymn-writers in the service-books or out of them is a poet of more than ordinary merit; although, when John of Damascus forgets his adversaries, and dispenses with his rhythmical peculiarities and gives forth the utterance of his deep emotional nature, he proves himself to be worthy of the title – the greatest of Greek Christian poets.

(2) The Greek language lived long and died slowly, and the Christian hymn-writers wrote in its decadence. It was then an instrument that has lost its fineness, and keenness, and polish – worn out and ineffective, – not the language of the men whose thoughts still charm the world, and who by its deft use gained for themselves and for their work immortality. It has little of the subtilty of expression, the variety of cadence, or the intellectual possibility, of the Greek of Homer, Plato, and Aristophanes. It is a language, moreover, crippled by the introduction of ecclesiastical and theological terms and phrases, which stubbornly refuse to lend themselves to classical rhythm. Such a language cannot be expected to have attraction for men to whom the ancient poets are a delight.

(3) The hymns of the Greek Church are all in rhythmical prose – strangely Oriental in appearance – with the exception of those by John of Damascus, which are in iambs; and difficulties confront one on every page. What lines will reward the work of rendering? Prayer, Gospel, psalm, hymn, and exhortation follow each other, and are sometimes strangely interlaced. Where does one begin and another end? Then, there is meaningless repetition which must be passed over, and expressions demanding modification. The symbolism is extravagant, and sometimes a single hymn is crowded with figures the most grotesque. The Mariolatry is excessive, and the hagiolatry offensive. Sifting and pruning are needed before a cento can be formed which would commend itself to modern taste.

But when all that is said, there remains much that is both beautiful and attractive. Some of the hymns and fragments are most chaste, – beautiful and tender in their simple expression of Gospel truths, which are so attractive to all true hearts, no matter by what creed dominated.

(4) The remarkable simplicity characterising those hymns constitutes, strangely it may seem, no small difficulty for the translator. The mere rendering of them into English prose is a comparatively easy task, and can be of no value to any one but the specialist, but to take the unmeasured lines and cut them to form stanzas, and in the process sacrifice nothing of their spirit to the exigencies of rhyme and rhythm, is a task by no means easy. But such drawbacks and difficulties are not insurmountable; and with the growing interest in hymnology which characterises our time, it will be strange if, in the years to come, the Greek service-books are not made to yield their tribute to the praise of the Christian Church in the West.

V. One prime characteristic of Greek hymnody should be referred to. Unlike the English hymn, which is intensely subjective – in some cases unhealthily so – the Greek hymn is in most cases objective. God in the glory of His majesty, and clothed with His attributes, is held up to the worship and adoration of His people. Christ, in His Person and Work, is set before the mind in a most realistic manner. His birth and its accompaniments; His life; the words He spoke, and the work He did; His Passion, in all the agony of its detail; the denial of Peter; the remorse of Judas; the Crucifixion; the darkness, the terror, the opened graves; the penitent thief; the loud cry, the death – all are depicted in plain, unmistakable language. So we have in the hymns of the Greek service-books a pictorial representation of the history of Redemption, which by engaging the mind appeals ultimately to the heart and its emotions. Our self-regarding praise is perhaps inevitable, as being the product of the meditative spirit which has its birth, and lives in the land of the twilight; but the advantages of the



objectiveness of Greek hymnody are so patent, that its cultivation might be fostered by our hymn-writers, with advantage to the devotional feeling of our people and to the worship of the Church.

VI. The hymns as they appear in the original are distinguished by a variety of terms, the meaning in certain cases being extremely vague, and in others to be derived from the subject of the hymn, or from its form, or the time, place, or manner in which it is sung. As we have no corresponding terms in our language, it is necessary to retain the original.

The following collection contains specimens of some of these. They are: —

*The Canon* (κανών). This is the most elaborate form into which the praise of the Greek Church is cast. A canon consists, nominally, of nine odes or hymns, but the second ode is always omitted on account of the denunciations of God against Israel which it contains. The canons of the Great Fast are made up of those rejected odes.

*Hirmos* (εἰρμός) is the first stanza of each ode. It may or may not have a connection with the stanzas following, but its function is to give them their rhythmical model.

*Troparion* (τροπάριον). The Troparia are the stanzas which follow the Hirmos, and the term is doubtless derived from the verb τρέπω, to turn. The Troparia *turn* to the strophes of the Hirmos, as to a model.

*Contakion* (κοντάκιον) is a term of uncertain origin. Contakia occur after the sixth ode of a canon. They are short hymns, and the term may be derived from the Latin *Canticum*.

*Stichera* (στιχηρά) designates a series of verses which are often taken from the Psalter.

*Idiomelon* (ιδιόμελον). Unlike Troparia, which follow the model set by the Hirmos, Idiomela follow no model.

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