

# JOHN BROWNLIE

HYMNS OF THE  
EARLY  
CHURCH

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**Hymns of the Early Church**

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**Brownlie J.**

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# John Brownlie

## Hymns of the Early Church / being translations from the poetry of the Latin church, arranged in the order of the Christian year

### PREFACE

This volume is intended for hours of devotion, and the vast storehouse of sacred poetry of the Latin Church has been put under tribute to supply the material.

If an apology should be required for the book, it may perhaps be enough to say that, while south of the Tweed Latin hymnody has had considerable attention paid to it, the subject has hitherto been all but neglected in Scotland. There may be reasons for this – we believe there are; but with these we have nothing to do here. The fact remains that, while Anglicans can point to a long list of names worthily associated with this department of Christian literature, including such well-known hymnologists as Trench, Neale, and Newman, we in Scotland have only two: Robert Campbell, author of the “St. Andrews Hymnal,” and Dr. Hamilton M’Gill, author of “Songs of the Christian Creed and Life,” with the addition of Dr. Horatius Bonar, who, besides reflecting the spirit of the poetry of the Early Church in many of his own hymns, has left us also a few skilful renderings of the original. The present volume is, we believe, the first of its kind produced by Scotsmen and Presbyterians.

In making a selection, the translator has experienced no difficulty in regard to the quantity and quality of material at hand; indeed, he has laboured under an embarrassment of riches. But the choice has been made from the best, and care has been taken to use only those hymns that might be acceptable in point of doctrine to the most fastidious.

It has been the aim of the translator to give the *idea* and *spirit* of the Latin verses, and except in a very few instances absolute faithfulness to the original has been observed, with as much literalness as it is possible to give to work of this sort.

As a rule the original measures have been retained, and only in a few pieces, where change seemed desirable, have different measures been adopted.

For the original text, the following collections have been used: —

Daniel, H. A. *Thesaurus Hymnologicus*. 5 vols. Halle and Leipzig, 1841-56.

Mone, F. J. *Lateinische Hymnen des Mittelalters*. 3 vols. Freiburg, 1853-55.

Wrangham, D. S. “The Liturgical Poetry of Adam St. Victor.” 3 vols. London, 1881.

Newman, J. H. *Hymni Ecclesiæ*. Oxford and London, 1865.

Neale, J. M. *Hymni Ecclesiæ*. London, 1851.

Trench, R. C. “Sacred Latin Poetry.” London, 1886.

The translator desires to give expression to his sense of indebtedness to Dr. M’Crie, whose share in this work is by no means confined to the Introduction and Notes. It was at his instigation that the task was at first undertaken, and his help and co-operation as the work of rendering progressed, were ungrudgingly given.

It will be cause for thankfulness to the translator if the work of some of the happiest hours of his life should meet with the appreciation and approbation of his fellow-countrymen, and awaken their interest in a department of devotional literature which has been too long neglected.

Portpatrick,

November 1895.

## HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

The Latin poetry of the Christian Church presents a tempting field for the exercise of scholarship and research. The relation in which it stands on the one hand to the classic poetry of Greece and Italy, and on the other to the Liturgies of the Eastern Church, the placing of accent in the room of quantity, and the rise and growth of rhyme – these and such-like matters will always prove attractive to experts and specialists. They are, however, quite beyond the scope of this brief paper. Those who wish to make an exhaustive study of a subject which has many sides and a copious literature, would do well to betake themselves to such standard works as are noted below.<sup>1</sup> The general reader may find something to profit and to interest him in the following general survey.

The title placed on our Saviour's cross, setting forth His accusation – "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," was written in three languages – in Hebrew and in Greek and in Latin. That collocation of languages gives the order in which the hymnody of the Church developed.

Hebrew hymnody is contained for the most part in the Hebrew Psalter; for the distinction between psalms and hymns is not one that admits of being applied to all Hebrew poetry. Our Lord and His disciples, as they went out to the Mount of Olives after the institution and first observance of the Supper Sacrament, sang a portion of the Great Hallel, which consists of Psalms cxiii. to cxviii. inclusive. Their doing so is described in the New Testament as singing "an hymn," just as the singing of Paul and Silas in the Philippian prison is said to be singing hymns unto God.<sup>2</sup>

In the Eastern or Greek Church hymnody was in both private and public use from earliest times. The oft-quoted letter of the younger Pliny, written soon after his arrival as Proconsul in the provinces of Bithynia and Pontus, which took place in A.D. 110, informs the Emperor that it was the practice of the Christians to meet together on a certain day and sing antiphonally (*secum invicem*) a hymn to Christ as their God; while the "Apostolical Constitutions," which take us back to the life of the Church in the second or third centuries, enjoin the use of morning and evening hymns of praise for God's beneficence by Christ. From the ample stores of Oriental hymnology there have come into modern collections many of their gems, thanks to the scholarship and versifying skill of Dr. Neale, Keble, and Canon Bright. To the first named we are indebted for such well-known renderings of Greek sacred pieces as "Fierce was the wild billow," and, "The day is past and over," as also for "Art thou weary, art thou languid?" From the author of the "Christian Year" we have a beautiful English rendering of a first or second century Greek hymn, preserved by Basil, "Hail, gladdening Light, of His pure glory poured;" and from Canon Bright we have the vesper or "lamplighting hymn," with its opening invocation, "Light of gladness, Beam Divine."

The Western Church came under Eastern influence in the matter of hymn composition in the fourth century. The first to compose hymns in Latin verse was Hilary of Poitiers. This theologian was banished to Phrygia by the Emperor Constantius, because of his defence of the Nicene Creed from the attacks of the Arian party. During the bishop's exile, his daughter, Abra, wrote to inform him that she had been sought in marriage, although only in her thirteenth year. This drew forth a reply in which the father left the decision to her own choice, indicating at the same time a personal preference for continued virginity. Enclosed in the communication were a *hymnus matutinus* and a *hymnus vespertinus*. The morning hymn, beginning *Lucis largitor splendida*, is still extant, and has been styled "the oldest authentic original Latin song of praise to Christ as God." It is, however, more than doubtful if the one for evening use survives; for the hymn, *Ad cæli clara non sum dignus sidera*,

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<sup>1</sup> Mone's *Lateinische Hymnen des Mittelalters*; Daniel's *Thesaurus Hymnologicus*; Tischer's *Kirchenlieder-Lexicon*; Trench's "Sacred Latin Poetry;" Neale's "Latin Hymns and Sequences," and "Essays on Liturgiology and Church History;" Duffield's "Latin Hymn-Writers and their Hymns;" Roundell Palmer's "Hymns: their History and Development in the Greek and Latin Churches, Germany, and Great Britain;" Julian's "Dictionary of Hymnology."

<sup>2</sup> Matt. xxvi. 30, ὑμνήσαντες; Acts xvi. 25, ὑμνοῦν, A. V. – "Sang praises unto God;" R. V. – "Were ... singing hymns unto God."

given in the Benedictine edition of Hilary's works, belongs to the sixth or seventh century, and is probably of Irish authorship.

Another name associated with the rise of sacred Latin poetry is that of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. It will ever be to the glory of this fourth-century Father that Augustine ascribed to him his conversion, and sought baptism at his hands. His illustrious convert tells, in the ninth book of his "Confessions," how the bishop defended the churches of Milan against the intrusion of Arian modes of worship, in spite of the efforts put forth by Justina, mother of the Emperor Valentinian, to obtain one of the basilicas for the use of the party she favoured. Alarmed by a report that he might be removed by force, the devout people of the city surrounded the bishop day and night, ready to die with him rather than allow him to be apprehended.

He, on his part, to stimulate their zeal and sustain their courage, supplied them with hymns to sing in honour of the Trinity. "Then," writes Augustine, "it was first instituted that, after the manner of the Eastern churches, hymns and psalms should be sung, lest the people should wax faint through the tediousness of sorrow; and from that day to this the custom is retained, divers (yea, almost all Thy) congregations throughout other parts of the world following herein." Well nigh a hundred hymns have at one time or another passed under the title Ambrosian, but the number of authenticated pieces is pitiably small, not exceeding four. In that small group the *Te Deum laudamus*, at one time ascribed to the Bishop of Milan, does not find a place. For, as in the case of the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, the *Dies Iræ*, and the *Veni, Sancte Spiritus*, the question who wrote the *Te Deum* has not received a final answer, if, indeed, it ever will. Of this, however, we may be well assured, that in the time of Jerome of the fifth century, hymns were in general use throughout the Western as in the Eastern Church. Writing to Marcellus, that most scholarly and erudite among the Fathers of the Latin Church assured his correspondent "You could not go into the field but you might hear the ploughman at his *Hallelujah*, the mower at his hymns, and the vine-dresser singing David's Psalms."

From the days of Hilary and of Ambrose, of Augustine and of Jerome, onwards through the patristic period of Church history, and all down the medieval centuries, there never failed to be a goodly succession of hymn-writers. To mention these, however briefly, would necessitate a violation of the limits of this essay. We refrain from attempting even an enumeration all the more readily, because an opportunity of giving brief biographical notices of the more outstanding contributors to the treasures of sacred Latin poetry will occur in the following pages when specimens of their masterpieces are submitted to the reader.

A few sentences may be added bearing upon the hymns contained in the service-books of the Church of Rome, and upon the relation of Latin hymnody to the Churches of the Reformation.

The use of hymns for purposes of private devotion preceded their insertion in the liturgical books of the pre-Reformation Church. Up to the seventh century the Breviaries which contained the prayers to be offered at the canonical hours had as matter to be sung only the words of Scripture. But the Spanish Council which met at Toledo in A.D. 633, laid down the general principle, that if in the worship of the sanctuary prayers may be offered in the words of uninspired men, so also may praise be sung. From that time the Churches of Western Christendom inserted hymns in their service-books, some of these compositions being of earlier date, but the larger number being of more recent times and of purely local interest. As every diocese and religious order claimed and exercised the right to construct its own ritual, Missal, and Breviary, there was endless variety of contents, considerable alterations of old compositions, and a general deterioration of quality. By the time Leo X. reached St. Peter's chair the need for revision had become clamant. Under the direction of that Medicean Pope, the collection of hymns in use at Rome was recast; and ultimately the entire Breviary appeared in revised form, when Urban VIII. was Pope, in 1631. In this revised Roman Breviary, which is now in general use throughout the Papal communion, the hymns of earliest composers – say from Hilary to Gregory – are for the most part allowed to remain, although in some cases altered without real amendment; but in the case of those pieces which could not be conformed to the laws of correct

Latinity there was an entire recasting. According to one authority, himself a revisionist, upwards of nine hundred alterations were made in the interests of metre, and the first lines of more than thirty hymns were altered. The Marquis of Bute executed a translation of the Roman Breviary in 1879, and then gave it as his deliberate judgment that the revisers, “with deplorable taste made a series of changes in the texts of the hymns which has been disastrous both to the literary merit and the historical interest of the poems.”

The Breviary of Paris has been subjected to revisions in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The third and latest revision was intrusted to a commission of three ecclesiastics, one of whom belonged to the Jansenist party, while another was Charles Coffin, then Rector of the University of Paris, who did the greater part of the work of editing, altering, and tinkering. Under Coffin’s manipulation only twenty-one hymns of the earlier period were retained, and the number of those from the pens of comparatively modern French writers was largely increased.

While all conversant with the subject will readily admit that both the Roman and the Parisian Breviary contain some noble verses, English versions of which are to be found in the writings of Williams, Chandler, Mant, Caswall, and Newman, as also in “Hymns Ancient and Modern,” the conviction is both general and well-founded that the principles and practice of liturgical revisionists have not been favourable to the interests of purity and simplicity in the case of ancient Latin hymnody.

Coming now to the relation in which Latin hymnology stands to the movement and Churches of the Reformation, it is to be noted that Luther showed his appreciation of what was good in the Church of his childhood when he rendered into the language of the Fatherland sixteen old hymns, twelve of these being taken from the Latin and the remaining four from the Old German of the Middle Ages. In his *Colloquia Mensalia*, the sturdy Protestant is to be heard censuring Ambrose as a wordy poet, but extolling the *Rex Christe Factor omnium* of Pope Gregory as the best hymn ever written. As with Luther, so with Melancthon and Zwingli and their immediate followers. They published collections and translations of the old Latin hymns, and they continued the use of such compositions in their public worship to a limited extent, even after they had ceased to employ the Latin tongue in Church services.

It is well known, at least to Anglican clergymen, that the Church of England Book of Common Prayer contains certain “Canticles,” to be used on Sundays and week days. Thus, after the Old Testament lesson has been read, the rubric provides that “there shall be said or sung in English the hymn called *Te Deum laudamus* daily throughout the year.” As an alternative to this great Creed hymn of Western Christendom there may be said or sung “this canticle, *Benedicite, omnia opera*,” that is, the Song of the Three Children, a part of the Greek addition to the third chapter of Daniel, and a paraphrase or expansion of the 148th Psalm. Then in the Ordinal of the Church of England, which provides for “the ordering of Priests” and “the consecration of Bishops,” there is a stage at which there is to be sung or said, *Veni, Creator Spiritus*. Of this hymn two English metrical versions are given in the Prayer Book of 1662 – that presently in use, an older and more diffuse rendering, and one more terse and spirited, the product of Bishop Cosin.

But it may not be generally known that many of the earliest service-books of the Continental and Scottish Churches had hymns appended to the Psalms in metre, some of which were versions in the vernacular of old Latin compositions. The French Psalter, edited by Marot in 1543, had the *Ave Maria* along with the Decalogue, the Belief, and the Lord’s Prayer. The Dutch Psalter of 1640 had the *Te Deum*, as well as metrical renderings of the Decalogue, the Song of Zacharias, of Mary, of Simeon, and of Elizabeth.

In the case of the Church of Scotland, the first edition of the Book of Common Order, published in 1564, gave only the Psalms; but the Bassandyne edition of the same book, published eleven years afterwards, contained five “Spiritual Songs;” that of 1587 gave ten, while some subsequent reprints have no fewer than fourteen. Among these, “commonly used in the Kirke and private houses,” will be found “The Song of Simeon, called *Nunc Dimittis*,” “The Song of Blessed Marie, called *Magnificat*,”



and *Veni, Creator*. The English of the last named is taken from the First Prayer Book of Edward VI., published in 1549, and is the version of this old hymn which occurs in “The Fourme of Ordering Priestes,” the longer and older of the two renderings already referred to.

How it has fared with Latin hymns in Protestant service-books from Reformation times to the present day is too wide a field of inquiry to enter upon at the close of this brief introduction. This it is safe to affirm, that no hymnal with any claim to completeness will be found to omit such sacred and classic pieces as, “Brief life is here our portion,” “Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,” “Jerusalem the golden,” “Jesus! the very thought of Thee,” “Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts,” “O come, all ye faithful,” “O Jesus, King most wonderful;” and all these are translations or paraphrases of early Latin hymns.

With the increase of interest in all that concerns the praise of God’s children, which is so marked a feature of recent times, there has come an ever-growing appreciation of the grandeur and beauty, the spiritual depth and longing wistfulness that characterise the great body of Latin hymnology; and, as the result of this appreciation, the finest and sweetest products are finding a larger place in quarters from which, at no very far back point of time, they were altogether excluded. Of this we have a striking illustration in the contents of the most recent attempt to construct a hymnal for use in Presbyterian Churches. In the “Draft Hymnal,” prepared by a joint-committee of the three leading denominations in Scotland, there are 557 hymns. Of these, five are confessedly translations from the Greek, and twenty-six from the Latin. With the Latin renderings the names of Bishop Cosin, Dryden, Sir Walter Scott, Caswall, Chandler, Neale, and Ray Palmer stand honourably associated.

Ayr, *October* 12, 1895.

## Sundays and Week Days

### ***SUNDAY MORNING*** **DIE, DIERUM PRINCIPE**

*By Charles Coffin, born at Ardennes in 1676; Rector of the University of Paris, 1718; died, 1749. The most of his hymns appeared in the Paris Breviary of 1736. In that service-book this is the hymn for Sunday at Matins.*

#### **I**

O day, the chief of days, whose light  
Sprang from the dark embrace of night,  
On which our Lord from death's grim thrall  
Arose, True Light, to lighten all.

#### **II**

Death trembling heard the mighty Lord,  
And darkness quick obeyed His word; —  
O shame on us! our tardy will  
Is slow His summons to fulfil.

#### **III**

While Nature yet unconscious lies,  
Come, let us, sons of light, arise,  
And cheerful raise our matin lay  
To chase the dark of night away.

#### **IV**

While all the world around is still,  
Come, and with songs the temple fill,  
Taught by the saints of bygone days,  
Whose words were song, whose songs were praise.

**V**

Loud trump of Heaven, our languor shake,  
And bid our slumbering spirits wake;  
Teach us the nobler life, and give,  
O Christ, the needed grace to live.

**VI**

O Font of love! Our steps attend;  
Those needed gifts in mercy send;  
And where Thy word is heard this day,  
Give Thou the Spirit's power, we pray.

**VII**

To Father and to Son be praise,  
To Thee, O Holy Ghost, always,  
Whose presence still the heart inspires  
With sacred light and glowing fires.

## O NATA LUX DE LUMINE

*The oldest text known of this hymn is from a tenth-century MS. It is in the Sarum Breviary (1495), also in that of Aberdeen (1509), which is substantially that of Sarum, and one of the very few surviving service-books of the Pre-Reformation period in Scotland.*

### I

O Light that from the light wast born,  
Redeemer of the world forlorn,  
In mercy now Thy suppliants spare,  
Our praise accept, and hear our prayer.

### II

Thou who didst wear our flesh below,  
To save our souls from endless woe,  
Of Thy blest Body, Lord, would we  
Efficient members ever be.

### III

More bright than sun Thine aspect gleamed,  
As snowdrift white Thy garments seemed,  
When on the mount Thy glory shone,  
To faithful witnesses alone.

### IV

There did the seers of old confer  
With those who Thy disciples were;  
And Thou on both didst shed abroad  
The glory of the eternal God.

### V

From heaven the Father's voice was heard

That Thee the eternal Son declared;  
And faithful hearts now love to own  
Thy glory, King of heaven, alone.

## VI

Grant us, we pray, to walk in light,  
Clad in Thy virtues sparkling bright,  
That, upward borne by deeds of love,  
Our souls may win the bliss above.

## VII

Loud praise to Thee our homage brings,  
Eternal God, Thou King of kings,  
Who reignest one, Thou one in three,  
From age to age eternally.

## TU TRINITATIS UNITAS

*Attributed by some, but with a small degree of probability, to Gregory the Great. The hymn occurs in all the editions of the Roman Breviary, as also in the Sarum, York, and Aberdeen Breviaries.*

### I

O Thou Eternal One in Three,  
Dread Ruler of the earth and sky,  
Accept the praise we yield to Thee,  
Who, waking, lift our songs on high.

### II

Now from the couch of rest we rise,  
While solemn night in silence reigns,  
And lift to Thee our earnest cries,  
To give Thy balm to heal our pains.

### III

If in the night by Satan's guile  
Our souls were lured by thought of sin;  
O bid Thy light celestial smile,  
And chase away the night within.

### IV

Purge Thou our flesh from every stain,  
Let not dull sloth our hearts depress;  
Nor let the sense of guilt remain,  
To chill the warmth our souls possess.

### V

To Thee, Redeemer blest, we pray,  
That in our souls Thy light may shine;

So we shall walk from day to day,  
Unerring in Thy way Divine.

## VI

Grant it, O Father, in Thy love,  
Grant it, O One-begotten Son,  
Who with the Spirit reign above,  
Now, and while endless ages run.

***SUNDAY EVENING***  
**DEUS CREATOR OMNIUM**

*By St. Ambrose, born at Lyons, Arles, or Trêves in 340; consecrated Bishop of Milan in 374; died on Easter Eve, 397. He introduced antiphonal chanting into the Western Church, and laid the foundation of Church music, which Gregory systematised.*



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