

Studying the Bible through Hymns

A Leader Reader by Mel Bringle

Don't Just Say It; Sing It!

Our earliest Christian ancestors did not just *read* Scripture; they *sang* it. When Jesus and his disciples finished their last Passover meal together, they “sang a hymn”—most likely, one of the traditional Hallel or “praise” psalms (Ps. 113–118)—before they went out into the night (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26). When Christians gathered in their house churches, they addressed one another with “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Modeling their worship on what they had experienced in the synagogues, they understood that reciting God’s word in a monotone was a form of disrespect. Holiness, the rabbis taught, was far too important for ordinary speech; it required the adornment of melody.¹

Unlike us, early Christians lived in an *oral* rather than a print culture: Scripture came to them through the ear and the tongue, the breath and the body. Even if they could not read, even if they did not possess scrolls or books, they still had deep access to the word of God because they learned significant portions of it *by heart*. Surely the rhythmic melodies of chant assisted them in this memorization process.

While we may not chant our Scripture readings anymore (at least, not in most Presbyterian churches!), we still employ musical forms through which the word of God can “dwell in us richly” (Col 3:16): not just the biblical Psalms but also the hymns and spiritual songs created by fellow believers of the past and present. Hymns provide wonderful resources to enhance our study of the Bible, if we take the time to familiarize ourselves with the basic scriptural index in the back of the hymnal or with fuller indices available in other

Prayer

Thank you for the sacred stories and promises that shape our faith,
and for the ways your Word dwells in us richly through the gift of song.
Hear us as we join the choir of everything that
breathes
to sing your praise.
Amen.

formats.² Using such resources, we can sing and study our way into an ever-deepening acquaintance with the stories and themes of God’s word.

Stories

Hymns are, indeed, an important tool for teaching Bible stories. The most obvious examples of this appear in Christmas carols, which unfold for us, act by act, the great drama of Jesus’ birth. Stanza 1 of “Angels, from the Realms of Glory,” for example, begins with the host of heaven; stanza 2 moves to the “shepherds, in the fields abiding”; stanza 3, to the “sages” (James Montgomery, 1816, 1825; *The Presbyterian Hymnal* #22). We may overlook this narrative teaching function of hymns because of all parts of the Bible, Jesus’ birth is among the most familiar. But suppose we had never heard of it before? How much would we learn through the words of hymns about its cast of characters, scenic backdrop, and dramatic action? Indeed, how many unchurched people in our culture can still recount the birth story because of the carols they have heard as a constant backdrop to Christmas season?

Other instances of the teaching function of hymns appear in stories that are less familiar. The Transfiguration is a telling example. Look at hymns #73, #74, and #75 in the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal*: “Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory”; “Jesus on the Mountain Peak”; “O Wondrous Sight, O Vision Fair.” How does each of these texts recast the mysterious episode from Matthew 17 and Luke 9? Who are the principal characters? What is the setting? What happens? To educate a culture increasingly lacking in biblical literacy, the committee making song selections for the Presbyterian hymnal scheduled for publication in 2013 is proposing to include in that volume even more hymns that retell Bible stories in poetic form.

But a good hymnic account of a biblical story does more than simply replay the action. It also *interprets* the action, setting it into a broader context. So, just as we understand events of our own lives better by see-

ing how moments of the past have shaped us, we also grasp the biblical narrative better when we see the echoes and anticipations that run from story to story. Think, for example, of the great Easter hymn dating to John of Damascus in the eighth century: “Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain” (#114 and #115). What does this hymn teach us about the relationship between the exodus and the resurrection?

Finally, a good hymn not only contextualizes a biblical story. It also *applies* it, drawing out pastoral implications for our own journeys of faith. Often, this happens in the closing stanza, as events of the past are brought pointedly into the present. Look again, for example, at hymn #73, “Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory.” According to poet Tom Troeger, what meaning should the transfiguration have for our lives today?

Themes

Of course, not every hymn is narrative in style. Many are thematic instead. Rather than retell biblical stories, they compile biblical images and convey them in melodic and memorable form. For example, not many of us would claim to be able to quote by heart from the short book of Lamentations, tucked as it is between the major prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet, consider the following verses from chapter 3:

- 22 The Steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
- 23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness. (ESV)

Then flip to hymn #276 (that is, if you have not already found yourself making melody to God in your heart!) and look at the refrain:

Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning, new mercies I see.

—Thomas Obediah Chisholm, 1923

Hymn study provides countless further examples. After all, if a line of Scripture delivers a meaningful promise or arresting image, chances are good it has inspired some writer not just to say it but to *sing* it: to put it into the body of a hymn. Consider the following pairings:

- “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5) and “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” (#384): “I trace the rain-

What’s the Difference Between a Song and a Hymn?

Understandings of the difference between the two have changed over time. Originally, in ancient Greece, a hymn was simply a song that praised a god or an athlete. In this sense, all hymns are also songs but not all songs are hymns.

Today, a hymn is considered to be a strophic religious poem with each stanza matched to the same music. For example, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” is a four-line religious poem with several stanzas set to the tune “Hymn to Joy.” Each line of each successive stanza is sung to the same notes. It is definitely a hymn.

Many religious songs do not follow this definition of a traditional hymn today and have alternate verses sung to different melodies. Often a religious text is written and then music is written for it, and perhaps only a few lines are repeated with the same music during the song. Many praise songs fall in this category.

So, do we have a hymnbook or a sacred song book? The current Presbyterian hymnal contains more than just hymns by today’s common definition. But if we follow the original definition, they are all hymns.

bow through the rain, / And feel the promise is not vain / That morn shall tearless be” (George Matheson, 1882).

- “Where I am, there will my servant be also” (John 12:26) and “O Jesus, I Have Promised” (#389): “O Jesus, Thou hast promised / To all who follow Thee / That where Thou art in glory / There shall Thy servant be” (John Ernest Bode, 1866).
- “Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55), and “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!” (#113): “Lives again our glorious King; / Alleluia! / Where, O death, is now your sting? / Alleluia!” (Charles Wesley, 1739).

Conclusion

At least one other hymn in the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* makes use of the passage from 1 Corinthians 15 cited above. Can you find it? How many other such pairings can you identify by working your way through the hymnal’s scriptural index, as part of a personal or group devotional practice? Not only are the relationships fun to unearth; they are also deeply enriching.

After all, the most important lessons of our faith should never simply be spoken. They cry out to be sung!

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2005), 7.
2. See Judith Muck, *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Complete Concordance and Indexes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997) or William Smith’s superlative index available at <http://www.hymnary.org/files/hymnary/other/hs3.pdf>.