

Hymnology

#117 “Brightest and best of the stars of the morning” (Morning Star): In his efforts to improve congregational singing in his parish in Hodnet, England, the young rector, Reginald Heber, eventually drew on his own poetic skills to write hymns for his people. In 1811 this hymn was published in *The Christian Observer* within a series written by Heber intended to be “appropriate to the Sundays and principal Holydays of the year; connected in some degree with their particular Collects and Gospels, and designed to be sung between the Nicene Creed and the Sermon.” Heber’s introduction to these hymns goes on to express the writer’s intention to provide texts that are not only liturgically appropriate, but that will avoid use of excessively familiar language when addressing God. This poet, like many others of his time, found that the practice of only singing psalms in worship was of limited benefit to a congregation. He also was sensitive to what he described as “ditties of embraces and passion, or language which it would be disgraceful in an earthly sovereign to endure.” The text, while containing no language that could give offense for the reasons mentioned above, has been criticized and rejected from several publications because of its use of the term “star of the east,” which some have said might imply star worship. The *Hymnal Companion 1940* comments further, “The phrase ‘sons of the morning’ may derive from Isaiah 14:12, where Lucifer is so described. To avoid this confusion the present hymnal changes the words to ‘stars of the morning.’” The music is excerpted from a choir anthem composed in June 1892 by James P. Harding for the Gifford Hall Mission in Islington (North London), where Harding and his brother contributed much time and money for the benefit of the underprivileged people who lived there.

#497 “How bright appears the Morning Star” (Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern): The evolution of the English translation of the German text is complex. Philip Nicolai wrote his original German chorale toward the end of the sixteenth century. It was first published in the author’s *Fremden Spiegel dess ewigen Lebens* (Frankfurt, 1599) with the title “A Spiritual Bridal Song of the Believing Soul Concerning Jesus Christ, her Heavenly Bridegroom: Based on the 45th Psalm of the Prophet David.” John Christian Jacobi included a complete and fairly accurate translation of Nicolai’s hymn in his *Psalmodia Germanica* (London, 1722). Its opening line was “How bright appears the Morning Star.” After that, other translations appeared in various hymnals and the text was altered. The music is commonly referred to as the “Queen of Chorales.” (The “King of Chorales” is *Wachet auf*, known in English as “Sleepers, Wake.”) The chorale is the work of the same person as the text. J.S. Bach used this tune in his Cantatas 1, 36, 37, 49, 61, and 172 and also based an organ composition on it.

#128 “We three kings of Orient are” (Three kings of orient): The biblical account of the coming of the Magi makes no attempt to identify them other than to say that they are “from the East” (which could indicate Arabia, Mesopotamia, or the regions beyond). All that is clear is that they have studied the stars and have come from far away. The number of magi seems largely to have been inferred from the catalogue of their gifts, so that Western Christianity from the time of Origen (ca. 185- ca. 254) has assumed that there were three (though in the Syrian church there were often as many as twelve! By the early Middle Ages they had even been assigned names, and their place in popular piety was enlarged by episodes in mystery plays and by a whole subgenre of “three kings plays.” After Frederick Barbarossa transferred their supposed relics from Milan to Cologne in 1162, the cult of the

Three Kings became further entrenched by being intertwined with a wide variety of folk customs and beliefs. Even the Reformation was not able to dislodge much of the inherited religious affection for these fascinating figures. John Henry Hopkins, Jr.'s familiar Epiphany carol is thoroughly steeped in all this lore. The hymn's usefulness for teaching and its simplicity have brought it great popularity in both the US and in England. The tune, which has become so popular that it has been cited as an "ancient carol," was written in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins, Jr., for use with this text. Mr. Hopkins was a music teacher at General Theological Seminary.

#124 "What star is this, with beams so bright" (Puer nobis): The original Latin text of this hymn was written by Charles Coffin as an evening hymn for the Epiphany, and first appeared in the *Breviary* (Paris, 1736). The present translation is based on the English version of John Chandler, first published in his *Hymns of the Primitive Church* (London, 1837). The tune is found in a fifteenth-century manuscript from the Trier Library. It is the work of Michael Praetorius and is taken from his *Musae Sioniae* (Wolfenbüttel, 1609). The tune was first used with the Latin hymn "Puer nobis nascitur."

#119 "As with gladness men of old" (Dix): The text was written by William Chatterton Dix about 1860 during an illness. It was first printed in a collection of hymns for private circulation, *Hymn of Love and Joy*. The tune Dix was composed by the German musician Conrad Kocher for the text "Treuer Heiland wir sind hier," and first appeared in his collection *Stimmen aus dem Reiche Gottes* (Stuttgart, 1838). William H. Monk shortened the melody and harmonized it for the original edition of *Hymns Ancient & Modern*, where it appeared with William C. Dix's text, hence the tune name.

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