



## HYMN OF THE MONTH – January 2019

“Brightest and Best” is a hymn written in 1811 by Anglican bishop, Reginald Heber. He wrote it to be sung at the feast of Epiphany. Heber was born in 1783 to a wealthy, educated family. He was a very bright youth, translating a Latin classic into English at the age of seven and entering Oxford at the age of 17. During his time there, he won two awards for his poetry.

After his graduation he became rector of his father’s church in the village of Hodnet. During his 16 years at this parish, he took on the task of improving hymn singing in the congregation. When he arrived, they were still singing only metrical psalms. He couldn’t find the hymns he wanted, especially those that would fit the Anglican liturgy and the requirements of the *Book of Common Prayer* so he decided to prepare his own hymnal and invited other poets to contribute, including Sir Walter Scott and Henry Milman. Hymn singing was not firmly established in the Anglican Church at this time, and the bishop of London refused Heber’s request to publish a hymnal. “Brightest and Best” was thus first published in the *Christian Observer* in November 1811 before his wife Amelia Heber published it in 1827 as *Hymns Written and Adapted to the Weekly Service of the Church Year*.

He was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823. He worked tirelessly there for three years until the weather and travel took a toll on his health and he died of a stroke. Most of his 57 hymns, which include “Holy, Holy, Holy,” are still in use today.

The tune for this hymn is “Star in the East,” and was taken from the tunebook, *The Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion* which was compiled by William Walker and printed in 1835 in Philadelphia. It contained 335 songs, went through several editions, and became one of the most popular southern tunebooks in the 19th century. In 1867 Walker claimed over 600,000 copies had been sold.

“Brightest and Best” has been recorded by several artists, including Glen Campbell, Joanne Hogg and Kathy Mattea. “The Kentucky traditional singer Jean Ritchie often sang this and told of her childhood memory of her grandmother sitting by the fire and singing it quietly to herself on Twelfth Night. The Library of Congress collected it from her in 1951.”

Resources: Wikipedia, Hymnary.org., umcdiscipleshp.org.

