

HYMN INTERPRETATION

EMILY R. BRINK

“The Song of Simeon”

The Gospel according to Luke includes three canticles that have been sung in many places around the world every day for more than 1500 years. In fact, many people still know those songs by the first words of the Latin texts. The Song of Zechariah (*Benedictus*, Luke 1:68–79) is associated with Morning Prayer; the Song of Mary (*Magnificat*, Luke 1:46–55) is associated with Evening Prayer, or Vespers; and the Song of Simeon (*Nunc Dimittis*, Luke 2:29–32) is associated with Night Prayer, or Compline. Monastic communities that maintain services of daily prayer continue the tradition to this day. Countless choral settings have been composed on these texts, and most hymnals include them, as well they should. By singing these ancient biblical songs, we join our voices with the church of all times and places.

Of these three canticles, only the Song of Simeon was included in the 1562 edition of the *Genevan Psalter*.¹ There were 152 texts in that collection—the 150 psalms, a setting of the Ten Commandments, and the Song of Simeon. The two additions to the psalms were very likely included because of the liturgical use John Calvin had in mind for them.² The Ten Commandments were sung in connection with the service of confession, and the Song of Simeon was sung during the Lord’s Supper, which Calvin hoped would be celebrated weekly. Calvin struggled to permit congregational singing at all during worship; the church council (which was also the city council in the city-state of Geneva) had not only banned all singing, but also banned Calvin for awhile, largely over liturgical issues. But when he returned after three years, he was able to convince them to permit congregational singing of the psalms. He never was able to convince them of weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The inclusion of the Song of Simeon in the completed 1562 edition could be considered as testimony to his intent.

The Text

The Song of Simeon is a short text, coming as the climax of a brief encounter in the temple. As good Jewish parents, Mary and Joseph had brought Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord and offer a sacrifice. Simeon, by tradition thought to be an old man, was moved by the Spirit to go to meet them that day. When he saw Jesus, he took him in his arms and praised God with the words by which he is remembered.

The first line speaks of Simeon’s joy at the fulfillment of a promise that this same Spirit had made to

him: that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. That was a small promise related to a much bigger promise. All the thousands of years of longing on the part of the Jewish people are wrapped up in his song of gratitude and joy that the Messiah had come. This was what he and every pious Jew longed for more than anything. After this, he could die in peace. He knew the Scriptures well, because he rejoices that the promised salvation would not only be for his people, but for all people—Gentile and Jew alike. In singing this song, we rejoice with him and with everyone who looks to the Christ as the Messiah.

The setting here is by Dewey Westra (1899–1979), a high school teacher (math and astronomy, among other subjects), a poet and translator of poetry (into and from English, Dutch, and Friesian), musician, and ardent supporter of the Genevan Psalms. Born in Holland, Michigan, he grew up in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), a small denomination started by Dutch immigrants who were committed to exclusive psalmody. He grew up still singing in Dutch from the Genevan Psalter, carrying on a tradition of more than 350 years. He probably started memorizing the psalms in Dutch from the first grade on, a stanza a week in the local Christian day school, according to a well-established curriculum.

In 1914, when Dewey was fifteen, everything in worship changed when the CRC adopted the new 1912 *Psalter*, produced by seven Presbyterian and two Reformed denominations. The English and Scottish Presbyterians had different traditions of metrical psalmody, including the revered 1650 Scottish Psalter and the “Christianized” psalm texts of Isaac Watts, all sung to a very few meters. They did not know the Genevan tunes. The new psalter texts were set to a many different tunes, some American, some borrowed from English hymns. In adopting this new English language psalter, the CRC lost its language and its entire melodic heritage virtually overnight. It was important to adopt the language of their country, but the wrenching loss of an entire poetic and melodic heritage was hard on this small church. The loss set Westra on a life-long mission; he eventually translated all 150 psalms as well as the Ten Commandments and the Song of Simeon into English to fit the Genevan tunes.³

The Music

Louis Bourgeois (c. 1510–c.1561) is credited with the tune for the Song of Simeon in the *Genevan Psalter*. He was also a teacher, living in Geneva, and was enlisted by Calvin to become editor of the 1551 edition of the *Genevan Psalter*. He contributed more than thirty original tunes and edited and revised as many more. The tune for the Song of Simeon is typi-

cal of the Genevan tunes: a range of an octave, mostly stepwise. The lines are brief (6.6.7 D), and in the original format would have included a full rest at the end of each phrase, not only in the middle as edited for the *Psalter Hymnal* and shown here.

The setting is by Claude Goudimel (1505–1572), who actually set three complete settings of the entire *Genevan Psalter*, first as simple chorale-like settings, and also in more elaborate motet-like settings. The melody was originally in the tenor, and the second half of the melody was repeated each time, extending this short hymn of praise to an ABB structure.

Singing the Song of Simeon

How do we sing the text today? When we sing it at the end of a worship service, we are singing about the salvation we have seen revealed in Word and Sacrament during that service. When we receive the grace of God, we can depart from our liturgical worship in peace to take up our lives of daily worship. In these few lines, we look back in gratitude to a promise fulfilled and look forward in peace and serenity to whatever the future holds. This moment of singing unites us with the promises of God past, present, and future.

The Song of Simeon makes a wonderful ending hymn—to a service or to a life. It is a prayer I would like sung at my own funeral some day. Many congregations conclude their services with a doxology. OLD HUNDREDTH was often—and still is in some churches—sung at the conclusion of every service. That unvarying approach may breed singing on “automatic

pilot.” On the other hand, churches that end with different closing hymns each week don’t live with a text long enough to internalize it, perhaps to commit it to memory so it can be there at any time of day or night, to bless us and to give us words for thankful prayer. So next year, consider singing the Song of Simeon for a season. I commend it for Epiphany, perhaps from the first Sunday after January 6 until the beginning of Lent. Depending on how often your church celebrates the Lord’s Supper, you may also want to consider it for Communion services. Perhaps you’ll find yourself singing this prayer and praying this song on many occasions of epiphany, when God breaks through and reminds us of “this gift, so great, so rare.”

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Notes

¹See forthcoming article on the Genevan Psalter.

²See Witvliet, John D. *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 209.

³In 1934, the CRC prepared its first independent psalter hymnal; I wish I could say that the impetus was to restore the Genevan psalms, and that did happen, partly due to Dewey Westra’s efforts. But the larger issue facing the church then was whether to admit hymns. As the title indicates, the 1934 *Psalter Hymnal* included hymns, another major event in the liturgical life of the CRC and one that further eroded the heritage of psalmody. The Genevan tradition never recovered in the CRC.

Song of Simeon

Nunc Dimittis

NUNC DIMITTIS 6.6.7 D

Louis Bourgeois, 1551

Harm. Claude Goudimel, 1564

Para. Dewey Westra, 1931; alt.

1. Now may Your ser - vant, Lord, Ac - cord - ing to Your word,
2. You did for all pre - pare This gift so great, so rare,

De - part in ex - ul - ta - tion. My peace shall be se - rene,
Ful - fill - ing proph - ets' sto - ry— A light to show the way

For now my eyes have seen Your won - der - ful sal - va - tion.
To Gen - tiles gone a - stray, And un - to Is - rael's glo - ry.