

HYMN INTERPRETATION

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The author of this ancient hymn, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (c. 348–413), was born in Spain and enjoyed a full professional career as a lawyer and civic administrator in the late Roman Empire. In his latter years, he embraced a secluded and devout lifestyle, writing works which would become very influential in medieval times. He was one of several authors who created the Christian Latin lyric, a new poetic genre developed from the fourth century onward.¹

Prudentius lived in an era when, although the Christian church had been given freedom by the Empire, turbulent times had not ended; indeed the Empire itself was in decline and would disintegrate some 60 years after Prudentius' death. The fourth century was marked by fierce theological debate regarding the nature of Jesus Christ: was he—the Logos, Word of God made flesh, as the gospel of John calls him—truly God, or merely a creature of God, far higher than angels, but merely fashioned by God before other created things? The formulation in the year 325 of Trinitarian and Christological doctrine as enshrined in the Nicene Creed was a milestone of enormous significance in the church's history, and it is under this credo that Prudentius and other writers penned their literary works. Moreover, by this time, there was a desire in the ecclesial community to demonstrate that Christian faith could be expressed with clarity and beauty in cultural forms that could stand alongside the monuments of the great civilizations. Therefore, poetic texts like that of Prudentius were not necessarily intended for common worship, even though they were cast in hymn-like meters (the hymn under consideration here actually introduced a meter new in its time).

"Of the Father's Love Begotten"—in Latin, *Corde natus ex parentis*—is an excerpt from the ninth poem of Prudentius' important work *Cathemerinon*, a collection of 12 hymnic pieces which can be used throughout the day. Some sources give as many as nine stanzas of the original,² and others, such as most current hymnals, only five or six. John Mason Neale (1818–1866), hymnist and scholar of Latin and Greek hymnody, translated selected stanzas of Prudentius' lengthy poem, initially rendering the first line as "Of the Father Sole Begotten."³ The title best known subsequently has been "Of the Father's Love Begotten," and recently, the hymn has appeared with titles/opening lines such as "Of God's Very Heart" and "Of Eternal Love Begotten." These latter versions reflect contemporary gender-sensitivity and are in fact appropriate translations of *corde natus ex parentis*, literally, "born of the parent's heart." The hymn in the majority of its many published appearances in English

Of the Father's Love Begotten

1. Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are and have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore.
2. At his word the worlds were framed.
He commanded, it was done:
heaven and earth and depths of ocean
in their threefold order one;
all that grows beneath the shining
of the moon and burning sun,
evermore and evermore.
3. O that birth for ever blessed,
when the Virgin full of grace,
by the Holy Ghost conceiving,
bore the Saviour of our race,
and the babe, the world's redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face,
evermore and evermore.
4. This is he whom seers in old time
chanted of with one accord,
whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word;
now he shines, the long expected;
let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore.
5. O ye heights of heaven, adore him;
angel hosts, his praises sing;
powers, dominions, bow before him,
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
every voice in concert ring,
evermore and evermore.
6. Christ, to thee, with God most blessed,
and, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and unwearied praises be,
honour, glory, and dominion
and eternal victory,
evermore and evermore.

—Aurelius Clemens Prudentius,
translated by John Mason Neale, alt.

remains essentially Neale's translation with alterations, some of which were made early on by Neale himself and by his contemporary, Henry Williams Baker.⁴

The first phrases, "Of the Father's love begotten ere the worlds began to be," open wide a cosmic vista like that of John's gospel prologue: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). Christ is Alpha and Omega, the Greek alphabet's "A to Z" of the whole universe (Rev. 1:8), the beginning and ultimate goal of all things; he is thus divine, not a creation of God but truly God. Textual affinity is apparent between these opening lines and the Nicene Creed, "one Lord Jesus Christ . . . eternally begotten of the Father." The refrain following this stanza and all others, "evermore, and evermore," is an addition to the original poetic text of Prudentius.

An image of Christ as Lord-Creator pervades the second stanza, linking with the Creed's statement that "through him all things were made" and recalling the creation account in Genesis: God spoke and it was done, "heaven and earth were completed with all their array" (Gen. 2:1). Here Prudentius' text also parallels Psalm 33:9, which reads: "he spoke, and it was created; he commanded, and there it stood." The phrase "threefold order" denotes the way that the ancients viewed the cosmic divisions of creation, and similar terminology appears in many scripture passages, for example, in Phillipians 2:10.

The third stanza exults in the birth of the Saviour, depicting his mother in language akin to the gospel of Luke, verse 1:26 and following: "the Virgin full of grace . . . by the Holy Ghost conceiving." It is she who gave birth to the child called Jesus, "the one who is to save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).⁵ The mention of "the babe" in this stanza is framed by the names Saviour and Redeemer, which establish a context for the nativity in Bethlehem: that is, the birth of Jesus is significant only because of his redemptive mission as the Christ. The original Latin speaks not of a baby in a manger, but rather incorporates twice into this stanza the word *puer*, an encompassing term meaning servant/child. It is the figure of the promised one of the Book of Isaiah: "a child born for us, a son given to us, and dominion is laid on his shoulders" (Isa. 9:5-6). Clearly Prudentius' hymn, which is generally used at Christmas, intends to highlight the saving Lord and cosmic Christ, skirting past historical details of the birth of the baby Jesus.

The world's longing for salvation is summarized with the greatest economy in the fourth stanza. "Seers in old time" can be understood as voices of messianic hope which existed "outside the boundaries of the people of Israel."⁶ Should it be surprising, asks Jaroslav Pelikan, that early Christian apologists would look to Greco-Roman culture and find there, in seer and in oracle, evidence of a universal desire for "a new human race, one whose citizenship would be of heaven . . . the abolition of the ancient and hereditary blight of

wickedness . . . all of this brought about by the coming of the wondrous Virgin and by the birth of the divine Child, who would be the very progeny of the Most High?"⁷ Prophetic literature from the Hebrew tradition has long been applied to Jesus: the Christ will be "the sun of righteousness," shining out with healing in his wings (Mal. 3:20) and radiant over a people who once walked in darkness (Isa. 9:1). Christian scriptures allude innumerable times to God's promises through the prophets; and Jesus himself, referring to a passage from Isaiah, is recorded as saying, "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen" (Luke 4:21).

The entire fifth stanza is infused with biblical spirit and vocabulary: it recalls, for instance, Psalm 148, which summons heavenly heights and angelic hosts to give glory, and Psalm 145, which is a paean of praise to God the King. No one on earth can be silent, says the oft-quoted Pauline passage that finds here an echo in Prudentius' hymn; rather, everyone "should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord" (Phil. 2:10-11). The final doxological stanza honouring the Trinity, is like the hymn's refrain, not original to the text of Prudentius.

With Neale's addition of the brief repeated phrase "evermore and evermore," the meter for the hymn is 87.87.87.7. The hymn tune associated with "Of the Father's Love Begotten" is DIVINUM MYSTERIUM, a plainsong melody which has been traced back as far as twelfth-century manuscript sources and which was paired with Neale's text in its initial appearance.

The first time I heard this hymn was at a church music conference many years ago, in a session conducted by Alice Parker. With her special gift for sensitivity to text and her knowledge of historical style, Parker led participants in a memorable interpretation of this venerable piece. The lowest voices supported the "congregation's" melody with a hummed "pedal" on the tonic; as the stanzas went on, the male voices divided to include a pedal note on the fifth, and finally female voices duplicated each of these sustained tones in the upper octave: those who had the melody were aurally surrounded with perfect fourths and fifths and octaves, as might well have happened in the Middle Ages.⁸ Sung this way, "Of the Father's Love Begotten" had a haunting quality that was stylistically authentic for the period of the melody.

The hymn, performed in such a manner, embodies and expresses even more fully the accumulated wealth of centuries of Christian song: a theologically rich fifth-century poem, chanted to an eminently vocal twelfth-century tune, enhanced with the pure harmonic intervals so favoured by the medieval ear, the text sung in an English version by a nineteenth-century translator and taken up by the voices of God's people in the twenty-first century! Truly this is "hymn and chant and high thanksgiving," handed down by generations before us, praise reaching from age to age, "evermore, and evermore." ❧

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Notes

¹In the later third century, Latin replaced Greek as the language of liturgical worship in the Western church; other than the hymns of Ambrose of Milan (339–397), Latin poetic/hymnic works would not have been overly plentiful in Prudentius' time.

²Nine stanzas are given by Erik Routley, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), Hymn 155. The version with nine stanzas had appeared in the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861).

³This translation by John Mason Neale appeared in the second edition of *Hymnal Noted* (1854). John Julian lists several other mid-nineteenth-century translators and the first lines of their texts in *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (London: John Murray, 1915), 276. *The Dictionary of American Hymnology* records many occurrences in hymn collections, generally under the most common title, "Of the Father's Love Begotten"; for this information I am grateful to Mary Louise VanDyke.

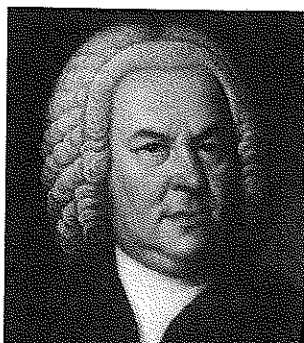
⁴The longevity of many of Neale's translations is due in large measure to his brilliant gift for languages and his poetic flair in English. He also had a remarkable sense for identifying fine texts from the earlier tradition of the church, both East and West. Henry Williams Baker (1821–1877) is known for his own hymns and translations as well as editorial work, especially for early redactions of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

⁵In Hebrew, the name *Yehoshua*, transliterated to "Jesus," means "Yahweh saves."

⁶Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 36.

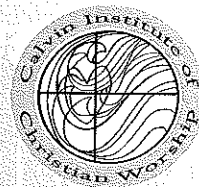
⁷Ibid.

⁸One of Alice Parker's themes in hymn interpretation is the importance and the musical appeal of a thoughtful, historically informed approach: "The page gives the raw material for performance: the text, the tune and one possible setting. The challenge is the translation into sound of those marks on the page. How do you speak the text meaningfully? Sing the tune so that no one escapes its pull? Perform the setting so that it enhances the melody?" See Parker's *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 72.



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