

Forging an Old Hymn Anew

Brian Wren

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I can't remember when I started wondering about the first line of the hymn we were singing. I had been teaching it for three years in the worship segment of my seminary's foundation course on Worship and Preaching.¹ To prepare for the sessions on congregational song, I had the students learn and sing unaccompanied a "Gloria" from Peru, one or two Taizé chants, and John Mason Neale's and Henry Williams Baker's translation, "Of the Father's love begotten" to the plainsong melody DIVINUM MYSTERIUM.

The short songs were learned entirely by ear. "Of the Father's love begotten" was learned by ear with help from the melody line, which was printed in British and Australian fashion above the text displayed in poetic form.

After singing the songs several times, we offered an experience in the acoustics of congregational song by singing them first in the classroom, then in a curtained and carpeted space, then in monastic-style procession down the hard-surface corridor past the administrative offices, and finally in a stone and glass stairwell that dramatically showed the power of unaccompanied voices in a resonant space. "Of the Father's love begotten" seemed particularly memorable: Once the tune was familiar the singing took on a quality of meditative concentration.

Somewhere along the way, I glanced at a hymnal that credited the original author and gave what appeared to be the first line of the Latin text: "*Corde natus ex parentis.*" "Ex parentis?" Though my Latin is sketchy, I felt sure that the noun here was "Parent" (*parens*,

¹Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, course P151.

parentis), not “Father” (*pater, patris*). If so, perhaps I could find the original, get help with the Latin, and contemplate making a new translation.²

A quick web search for “*Corde natus ex parentis*” yielded two identical Latin versions containing nine stanzas of three lines each, attributed to Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-413).³ Martha Lewis, a member of Glenn Memorial United Methodist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, and a retired teacher of Latin, was kind enough to give me a literal translation, of which the first stanza reads “Born from the heart of the parent before the beginning of the world, Alpha and Omega, synonymous (of the same meaning), he himself is the source and conclusion of all things that are, have been, and will be afterward.”

Clearly then, for reasons poetic perhaps theological, the author had chosen to say “born” not “begotten,” and “Parent” not “Father.”

A further search revealed that Prudentius’ hymn was considerably longer than the stanzas initially found: thirty-eight three-line stanzas totaling 114 lines.⁴ The nine-stanza selection uses lines 10-21, 25-27, 22-24, and 106-111, concluding with a later Trinitarian doxology not in Prudentius’ text. Current English versions derive from the translation by John Mason Neale, 1854, and Henry Williams Baker, 1861. According to Carlton Young⁵ a nine-stanza version of their translation was included in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 1861. Neale’s first stanza was retained, but the rest were by Baker.⁶

²Not having enough Latin to work directly from original sources, my research on this topic is at a “secondary” level only.

³From Cyberhymnal, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/non/la/cordenat.htm>, and <http://www.arlt.co.uk/dhtml/carols.php#corde>.

⁴See http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=168118&pageno=60. Prudentius’ poem is available from Project Gutenberg, a library of 17000 free e-books whose copyright has expired in the USA. See http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page

⁵Carlton R. Young, *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 540.

⁶A nine-stanza version, said to be from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 1922, is available at <http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/> and http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/of_the_fathers_love_begotten.htm. An online source for *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 1861, has seven stanzas, however. See <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/o/o739.html> and <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/am1861.html>.

To translate Prudentius' poem entails making a selection from the original and shaping it in the forms of English poetic meter. The Neale-Baker translation opts for a Christmas hymn by selecting Prudentius' stanzas on Christ's incarnation, birth, and judgment of humankind, and creation's response of praise and adoration. From the concluding phrase of the post-Prudentius doxology (*saeculorum saeculis*) comes Neale's resonant chorus, "evermore and evermore." Singing the Neale-Baker translation to the plainsong melody DIVINUM MYSTERIUM gives a powerful nonverbal signal of links with the past. As Michael Hawn observes, singing it is a cross-cultural experience. A portion of a fourth-century Latin poem, translated into English by nineteenth-century Anglicans hoping to reclaim the presumed glories of the medieval Church, is sung to a melody from medieval Italian and German trope (chant) collections.⁷ As Hawn also observes:

England also left other cultural marks on this text when the previously monophonic, unaccompanied melody was harmonized and accompanied on the organ, and when it was sung not by choirs at monastic gatherings but by congregations.

For Neale and Baker, rendering "*Corde natus ex parentis*" as "Of the Father's love begotten" probably seemed an obvious choice, given Prudentius' Trinitarian faith and their own classic Trinitarianism whereby "Father" means the First person of the Trinity, who eternally originates the Second ("the Son") and through whom (or from whom) proceeds the Third ("the Spirit"). "Begotten" ("fathered") derives from ancient erroneous biology whereby the male parent's sperm was thought to contain the entire personality and physique of the child, for which

⁷ C. Michael Hawn, "Singing with the Faithful of Every Time and Place: Thoughts on Liturgical Inculturation and Cross-Cultural Liturgy," *Yale Institute of Sacred Music online Colloquium Journal*, http://www.yale.edu/ism/colloq_journal/vol2/hawn1.html. Hawn's description of Prudentius as a "Spanish poet" is anachronistic. The Roman provinces of Hispania and Gaul were historical antecedents of modern Spain and France in which were spoken forms of Latin that developed into Spanish and French.

“seed” the mother’s womb was merely the seedbed.⁸ In classic Trinitarian theology and in the Neale-Baker translation, “begotten” is used in its abstract technical sense, meaning “generated, originated,” an understanding that probably escapes most modern singers of the hymn.

The Neale-Baker translation has been widely influential and appears with fewer stanzas and with other minor alterations in several recent denominational English language hymnals.⁹ To weigh possibilities for a new English version, I went back as near as I could get to the source, using Martin Pope’s 1905 translation as my guide to the Latin original, which, even to my limited knowledge, clearly has vivid imagery and strong rhythms.

It is time to meet the author. Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius was born in 348 CE at Saragossa (Caesaraugustus) in the Roman Province of Hispania (modern Spain). His life spanned the establishment of Christianity (380 CE) by the emperor Theodosius. He was named after Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Emperor, 161-180 CE), a notable writer, stoic philosopher, and legal reformer, who was also originally from Hispania. His middle name, Clemens, means “kind, merciful,” while Prudentius suggests someone who is experienced, prudent, discreet, and judicious.

Prudentius practiced law and was twice provincial governor before Theodosius summoned him to the Imperial court. At age 57 he retired from public life to become an ascetic, fasting until evening and abstaining from animal food.

⁸ Thus, infertility was understood as the fault of the woman (whose womb was called “barren”). Such male-centered views were impervious to problems posed by the fact that children often resemble their mothers!

⁹ In Australia, *Together in Song* (Ecumenical, 1999), 290; in Canada, *The Book of Praise* (Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1996), 163; and *Voices United* (United Church of Canada, 1996), 61; in Britain, *Church Hymnary IV* (Church of Scotland, 2005), 319; and *Rejoice and Sing* (United Reformed Church, 1991), 181; and, in the United States, *Chalice Hymnal* (Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, 1995), 104; *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2006), 295; *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Presbyterian Church USA, 1990), 309; *The New Century Hymnal* (United Church of Christ, 1995), 118; and *The United Methodist Hymnal* (United Methodist Church, 1989), 184. *Chalice Hymnal* and *Voices United* offer asterisked first-line alternatives, “Of eternal love begotten” and “Of God’s very heart begotten,” respectively, which are likely to be sung only as often as anyone attends to asterisks. *The New Century Hymnal* offers its own translation, which mixes fine phrases (for example, “One there was with no beginning, / One who is eternally –Source and Ending of all things that have been / and all things that are to be”) with archaisms or church-talk (“luminance,” “seers,” “shines forth”) and oddly follows “Of the Parent’s heart” with “begotten.”

Prudentius later collected his Christian poems and added a preface, which he himself dated 405 CE. His book, *Cathemerinon Liber* (Hymns for the Christian's Day), contains an autobiographical poetic preface and 12 hymns: for cock-crow, matins, before and after eating, the lighting of the lamps, before sleep, for all hours, fasting and after fasting, Christmas, Epiphany, and the burial of the dead. In the Preface, Prudentius looks back on his life, youthful sins, eloquence and skills, public achievements, and promotion to high rank. Recalling the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) he applies it to himself, as motivation for his change of course:

Yet what avail the prizes or the blows
of fortune, when the body's spark is quenched
and death annuls whatever state I held?
This sentence I must hear: "Whate'er thou art,
thy mind hath lost the world it loved: not God's
the things thou soughtest, Whose thou now shalt be?"
Yet now, ere hence I pass, my sinning soul
shall doff its folly and shall praise my Lord
if not by deeds, at least with humble lips.
Let each day link itself with grateful hymns
and every night re-echo songs of God.¹⁰

My source—as it was for Neale and Baker—is Prudentius' "Hymn for All Hours," which narrates the glorious deeds of Christ. A major portion of the hymn is devoted to Jesus' earthly life, focusing on his deeds of healing power. To give an idea of the scope of the work, here is an

¹⁰ From R. Martin Pope's 1905 translation of Prudentius' Preface. Go to http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=168118&pageno=3

outline: Born eternally from the Parent's heart, the One who created all worlds becomes incarnate to teach us God's ways and save us from eternal death. Foretold by Spirit-inspired prophets, the promised Savior is born of the Virgin Mary as heaven sings his praise. Successive stanzas narrate how he changes water into wine, cleanses a leper, heals a blind man using clay softened with spittle, stills the stormy sea, heals the woman with a hemorrhage as she touches his robe, raises a widow's son from death, raises Lazarus, walks on the water, heals the demon possessed man among the tombs, feeds the five thousand, and heals the paralyzed man carried by friends.

When Jesus is crucified, the sun veils itself in mourning. Blood and water flow from his pierced side. By dying to wash our guilt away, he wins the ultimate victory, foiling the great Evil Serpent and robbing it of its power over us as he breaks its hissing neck. He goes down to the dead to break their chains of sin and bring them back to life. Triumphant risen, Christ raises ancient patriarchs and saints and leads them up to heaven into God's presence. Old and young, male and female unite to sing Christ's praise, joined by the elements of creation: storm and sunshine, stream and sea, forest and wind, night and day.

Prudentius' story in song is both catholic and evangelical: catholic in its universal vision and evangelical as it uses the power of poetry and song to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

In the fourth century words spoken or sung without accompanying visual expression had far more impact than they would today. In such a culture the hymn's length—114 lines—was probably unremarkable. Though a multi-media event might compellingly communicate its vision, no modern congregation could sing a hymn of that length. Like Neale and Baker before me, I had to make a manageable selection. Since the 1960s, English-language hymnody has paid more attention to the ministry of Jesus. I resolved to do likewise. Moved by the power and scope of Prudentius' work, I decided to try to convey it in six stanzas. I kept continuity with Neale and

Baker by using DIVINUM MYSTERIUM and treating the last line of each stanza as a refrain. Since “evermore and evermore” derives from a later hand than Prudentius, I dropped it and honored his Christ-centeredness with a refrain using variations on “Jesus (Christ) our Savior.” My rendering can be accurately described as a distillation and partial translation. It begins from Christ’s life, asking, “Who is this?” (which, though not in Prudentius is a prominent question in the Gospels¹¹) and ending with the “answer” that Prudentius places near his beginning. Thus, after narrating Christ’s life and death, we come to the early Christian conclusion (John 1, etc.) that Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh. In crafting the hymn I kept close to Prudentius’ cosmology and included some biblical women among the saints of old who “in their dust no longer wait.”

“Who is this?” should be sung unaccompanied, in a key accessible to congregations. Adding harmony muddies the plainsong melody and empties the singing of its meditative power. The words should be printed in poetic form, as here; they should not be interlined with music. Doing so is in this case unnecessary and impairs comprehension and appreciation. Teach the melody first, without words. When it has become familiar, demonstrate how an underscored syllable indicates that it is sung to two notes, as in “changes water into wine.” Then sing the hymn.

¹¹See Matthew 21:10; Mark 1: 27, 4:41; Luke 8:49, 9:9; John 12: 34.

Who is this?¹²

by Brian Wren

This is a distillation and partial translation of “Corde natus ex parentis” by Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-413), in the poetic meter 9.7.9.7.11.7.7. and shaped to fit the plainsong melody, DIVINUM MYSTERIUM. Underscoring indicates that a syllable is sung to two notes.

WORDS: Brian Wren
MUSIC: 11th c. plainsong

DIVINUM MYSTERIUM
9.7.9.7.11.7.8.

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Who is this, who gives the blind their sight,

changes water in-to wine,

cleanses lepers, brings the dead to life,

calls the outcasts in to dine,

feeds the hungry, calms the raging of the sea,

¹²Completed April 2005. With thanks to Martha Lewis. Dedicated August 2007 to Don Hustad, scholar, musician, and friend, who, like Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, is both evangelical and ecumenical. © 2005 Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. Used by permission; all rights reserved.

human, yet with power divine?

This is Jesus Christ our Savior!

Who is this, who bleeds upon a cross

while the darkness hides the day,

pierced by loneliness and pointed spear

as disciples run away?

Who goes down to meet and liberate the dead?

Who can raise us from our clay?

Jesus Christ our living Savior!

Raised in glory from a guarded tomb,

Christ returns through heaven's gate.

Sarah, Abraham, and Miriam

in their dust no longer wait.

Moses and Elijah sing with all the saints,

free from sorrow, death, and fate,

led by Christ our risen Savior.

Now we know who lived as one of us:

Born of Mary, Joseph's child,

bright with goodness, Word at home in flesh,

tempted, tried, but not beguiled,

going bravely into shame and dreadful death,

flogged, rejected, and reviled:

Jesus Christ, our Friend and Savior.

Born forever from the Parent's heart,

seeing worlds not yet begun,

speaking, birthing water, sea, and land,

earth and heaven, moon and sun;

Praise the Origin, Conclusion, Aim, and End,

member of the Three in One:

Word of life, our hope and Savior.

Angels, join the singing universe.

Girls and boys, come lead our praise.

Every language shall be gladly heard

telling God's amazing ways.

Acts of loving-kindness shall fulfill our song,

till our re-awakened gaze

worships Christ, our joy and Savior.

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