

History of Hymns: “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty”

by Stanton Nelson



Reginald Heber

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ll rise to thee.
hty,
ity!*

Reginald Heber (1783-1826) is unique in many regards. Indeed, it spans many Christian traditions with four timeless stanzas. Not only that, but Heber was an Anglican who ministered to many cultures and races, placing him as one of the heroes of the Christian faith.

Part of the beauty of the hymn is how the text does not initiate praise, but instead serves as a response song. Both Isaiah 6:1-5 and Revelation 4:2-11 inspire this hymn, suggesting that the Trisagion (thrice holy) has been uttered in worship for centuries. Isaiah received his vision in the eighth century B.C.; John the Apostle recorded his revelation in the first century C.E.; while Reginald Heber composed his hymn in 1826, in the nineteenth century.

Congregations continue to be inspired by Heber’s text in the twenty-first century. It is safe to say that songs of praise, begun by the seraphim and cherubim, have been echoing throughout the millennia through the voice of the people.

What makes this hymn so special? First, the rhyme scheme is unique since all four lines of each stanza rhyme with the word “holy.” One won’t easily find another hymn written this way. Another reason why “Holy, holy, holy” is such a timeless hymn is its pairing with the well-known tune NICAEA. Written by John Bacchus Dykes (1823-1876), NICAEA has a unique elegance and magnificence, which in turn complements Heber’s stately language. There’s no cheap emotionalism and subjectivity apparent in the music or the words. Named after the Council of Nicaea, where the nature of the Trinity was shaped theologically, NICAEA is also a classic example of Victorian hymn tune writing, notably with its solid harmonies and subtle chromaticism.

Heber is careful to describe the Trinity without encroaching upon its mystery. This is especially evident with the phrase, “though the darkness hide Thee” in stanza 3, and this separation between God and man is exacerbated by sin (“though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see”). Though we may not see or completely understand the Trinity in its fullness in this lifetime, Heber’s and Dykes’s collaboration reminds us those are not reasons that preclude our worship of the Triune God.

One particular characteristic of “Holy, holy, holy!” is the unusual meter of 11.12.12.10. This distinguishes it

from most English texts that preceded it, especially those of Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and Charles Wesley (1707-1788), who wrote in relatively short stanzas including CM (8686), SM (6686), and LM (8888). This unusual meter, however, is finessed by Dykes's craftsmanship with the rhythm.

Along with the rhythm, the melody was masterfully constructed. The tune commences with a rising third, which could easily symbolize the Trinity, and continues with a chant-like character (there are few leaps and many consecutively repeated notes). Hymnals have left the original four-part harmony of Dykes's untouched, although most of them have transposed the key down a whole step from the original of E Major.

Reginald Heber was born in Cheshire, England, in 1783, with a precocity toward poetry. By the time Heber was twenty, he had already penned a poem titled "Palestine," which won the prestigious Newdigate Prize. Four years later, he was writing numerous hymns while he was vicar of Hodnet, Shropshire. This is the most probable time he composed "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty," as he stayed there fifteen years.

Most of his hymns, though, were not published until he passed away in 1826. His widow published Heber's impressive volume of hymns, which are arranged according to the church year, *Hymns Written and Adapted to the Weekly Church Service of the Year* (1827). This, along with *A Selection of Psalms and Hymns for the Parish Church of Banbury* (Third Edition, 1826), brought his most eminent hymn into the spotlight.

Heber intended for "Holy, Holy, Holy," written for Trinity Sunday, to be sung between the sermon and the creed by his parish in Hodnet. This was iconoclastic at the time, since hymn singing was prohibited in Church of England liturgies. In contrast, the Methodist societies in the eighteenth century were known for their hymn singing, along with the dissenting churches that had been using the hymns of Isaac Watts for nearly one hundred years. Consequently, then, British hymnology scholar J. R. Watson notes Heber was a man who "helped to dispel the idea that hymns were associated with Methodists and extreme Evangelicals" (*Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*). Unfortunately, he failed to persuade church authorities within the Church of England to grant permission for hymn singing during Sunday services while he was alive.

In 1826, Reginald Heber died in British India from a stroke while bathing (often referred to in India as *coup de soleil*), leaving an impressive legacy within Christianity. That was because Heber was the Anglican bishop over all of British India from 1823-1826. He worked tirelessly to build a training school for local clergy and traveled extensively around India preaching the gospel. He also embodied nineteenth-century British missiology, which purposed to use Britain's divine right and calling to evangelize the rest of the world. This is seen in Heber's hymns "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" and "Brightest and Best," two other of his commonly sung hymns. Heber had continued to write a few hymns, although most of his corpus was written during his Hodnet vicarship.

John Bacchus Dykes was not quite as copious in his output with hymn tunes as Heber was with hymn texts, but of his hymn tunes, NICAEA was his best-known work. He worked as the choir director of the Durham Cathedral for most of his life and passed away in northern England at the age of fifty-three. It is safe to say Dykes would be pleased his NICAEA has stood the test of time paired with "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty," and may that it "evermore shalt be."

For further reading:

JRW. "Reginald Heber." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press. Web. 30 Aug. 2017.<
<http://www.hymnology.co.uk/r/reginald-heber>>.

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<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-holy-holy-holy-lord-god-almighty>



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