

# History of Hymns: "How Great Thou Art"

by [C. Michael Hawn](#)

## *How Great Thou Art*

Carl Boberg

by Stuart K. Hine

*The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 77

As Carlton Young was preparing *The United Methodist Hymnal*, a *United Methodist Reporter* poll  
"How Great Thou Art" headed the list of hymns that should be retained in the then-forthcoming

As the poll was published, John A. Lovelace, *Reporter* editor *emeritus*, wrote, "What no poll  
found, though, is that 'How Great Thou Art' may also be United Methodism's least-liked hymn."  
*Methodist Reporter*, August 23, 1985).



Earlier, when the hymn was reluctantly included in the 1966 *Methodist Hymnal* (as most-requested hymn), Dr. Young notes that many complained that "the church's official hymnal would bring respectability to the theme song of the Billy Graham Crusades . . . . Others brought equally uninformed and unfair criticism on the Methodist Publishing House for presumably dictating editorial policy and cheapening the church's official hymnal" (Young, 1993, 409).

Many who fervently sing this hymn throughout the world each Sunday in myriad translations have no idea of the polarity of feeling that exists around it. Perhaps both sides would benefit from some historical perspective.

The origins of this hymn may be found with Swedish pastor Carl Boberg around 1886. Boberg (1859-1940) was a leading evangelist of his day and the editor of an influential Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden periodical *Sanningsvitnet* ("Witness of the Truth"). Boberg served in the Swedish parliament and published several volumes of poetry, including hymns. He also helped compile the first two hymnals for the Swedish Covenant Church.

Boberg's inspiration is said to have come one day when he was caught in a thunderstorm on the southeastern coast of Sweden. The violence of the storm followed by the return of the sun and the singing of birds left him falling to his knees in awe. Soon he penned the nine stanzas of the original version in Swedish beginning with "O Store Gud, nar jag den varld beskader." Several years later, Boberg unexpectedly heard his poem sung by a congregation to an old Swedish folk melody.

The subsequent history of the poem is somewhat unclear, but interesting. An earlier literal English translation of four of the stanzas by E. Gustav Johnson in 1925 began "O mighty God, when I behold the wonder." This version never caught on, however, though it may be found in some hymnals. The first stanza and refrain follow:

*O mighty God, when I behold the wonder  
Of nature's beauty, wrought by words of Thine,  
And how Thou ledest all from realms up yonder,  
Sustaining earthly life in love benign,*

*Refrain:*

*With rapture filled, my soul Thy name would laud,  
O mighty God! O mighty God!*

*With rapture filled, my soul Thy name would laud,  
O mighty God! O mighty God!*

In 1907, Manfred von Glehn (1867-1924) translated the text from the Swedish into German. It became the hymn, "Wie gross bist du." In 1927, a Russian version by the evangelical leader Ivan S. Prokhanoff (1896-1935) appeared in *Kimvali (Cymbals)*, a collection published by the Baptist Press in Poland. English missionary Stuart K. Hine (1899-1989) and his wife heard the Russian version sung as a vocal duet in the Ukraine.

As the Hine couple crossed into Sub-Carpathian Russia, the mountain scenery brought back the memory of this song. The first three stanzas were composed while in the Carpathian Mountains. When war broke out, Hine and his wife were forced to return to England in 1939. They used the first three stanzas in evangelistic endeavors during the "Blitz years." The fourth stanza was added after the war.

Baptist hymnologist William Reynolds cites comments by George Beverly Shea (1909-2013) on the hymn's introduction in the United States through the Billy Graham Crusades: "We first sang [it] in the Toronto, Canada, Crusade of 1955. Cliff Barrows [1923-2016] and his large volunteer choir assisted in the majestic refrains. Soon after, we used it in the 'Hour of Decision' [radio broadcasts] and in American crusades. In the New York meetings of 1957 the choir joined me in singing it ninety-three times!" (Reynolds, 1976, 162).

The first two stanzas establish the grandeur of God's creation while the refrain establishes our response, "How great thou art!" In stanza three, the God of the natural created order continues the creative act by sending God's Son to redeem a lost humanity. With this stanza, the primary theological perspective shifts from creation to atonement. While the first two stanzas express humanity's awe at the natural created order, this is not the ultimate goal of this hymn. Human sin has marred the gift of the Creator. The vivid description of nature in the first two stanzas finds its fulfillment in heaven or when we escape the earth.

The final stanza, however, may be seen as the completion of the story of creation and human redemption on an eschatological note; the fulfillment of creation takes place in heaven. Thus, this hymn embodies the breadth of the redemption story from Genesis to Revelation. Given the sweeping and shifting theological territory covered in this hymn, the refrain ties all the themes together with the reiteration of the hymn's central premise four times, "How great thou art!"

After an extended court battle to determine the ownership of the text and music, Hine's English words and his musical setting were assigned to Manna Music. The publisher was able to show that the 1953 version of the gospel hymn was the "first, final and fixed form of the hymn" (Young, 1993, 410).

The reader may notice that the text of the first stanza is not included in this article. "How Great Thou Art" is one of the most expensive hymns to include in a hymnal, costing \$2,000 for a permission fee for *The United Methodist Hymnal*. In spite of this, one can find numerous websites that provide the entire text (obviously without the publisher's permission) with accompanying music. I have heard the hymn sung in Sweden using Boberg's original version. The Swedish version is understated and sung in strict rhythm. This version is no less fervently felt, however, by Swedish Christians. The versions sung in the Graham Crusades are a vastly different experience from those I have heard in Sweden. Conducted by Cliff Barrows, the Crusade renditions featured soaring lines with fermatas on the last phrase of the refrain, and the resonant bass voice of George Beverly Shea. These were a part of my sacred soundscape as I grew up seeing the televised crusades (in black and white) and hearing them over and over again on LP vinyl records.

Recordings by numerous popular recording artists may be found on YouTube, but perhaps none are as memorable as the rendition by Elvis Presley (1935-1977) on his farewell tour in 1977 weeks before his death.

In honor of the roots of this hymn, Carl Boberg's picture appears with this article.

### **For further reading:**

Reynolds, William J. *Companion to the Baptist Hymnal*, 1975 Edition. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1976, 162.

Young, Carlton R. *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993, 409-411.

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