

Easter Hymn Stories

“The Day of Resurrection” and “Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain”

Some of our earliest hymns were originally written in Greek. This early tradition has been beautifully described by my hymnologist friend, Hugh T. McElrath (1921-2008) who taught hymnology for many years at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky:

John of Damascus (d.c.780) is generally considered the greatest of all the Greek hymnists. Like Andrew of Crete, he was educated at the cloister of Mar Saba. This desolate monastery hanging on a bare cliff located between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea was an important center for hymn writing in the 8th century. After a political career as chief councilor for the caliph of Damascus—the leading civil ruler of the Muhammadan faith—John and his foster brother, Cosmas (the Younger), gave up their earthly possessions and retired to Mar Saba. There they were under the tutelage of a learned Sicilian monk named Cosmas (the Elder).

John devoted himself to a life of writing, compiling huge works in the areas of science, philosophy and theology. His main contribution, however, was in the realms of hymnody and music. Indeed, what Gregory the Great (540-604) achieved in the collection and codification of Christian chant in the West, John achieved in the East, thereby giving great impetus to the development of music and hymnody in the Greek church. John’s fame as a hymn writer rests mainly on his composition of both words and music for the *canon*—the form originating with Andrew—which he perfected. The subject matter of his six canons was the incarnation conceived as the entire Christ-event: birth, earthly ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The most famous of these canons is the one for Easter, variously known as the “Golden Canon,” “King of Canons,” and “Queen of Canons.” It is generally recognized as the grandest piece of Greek sacred poetry in existence. From the first ode of this canon comes the hymn “The day of resurrection” in the free translation of Neale. This is a glorious hymn of victory, making the allegorical use of the Jewish Passover theme to apply to the triumph of Christ in the resurrection.

Another Easter hymn, also by John in the original, is “Come, ye (you) faithful, raise the strain”. It is translated by Neale from the first ode of the Canon for St. Thomas Sunday (the first Sunday after Easter Sunday). Based on the song of Moses (Ex. 1:1-18), this hymn employs the imagery of Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea, applying it to Christ’s deliverance from the waters of death to the joys of the resurrected life. (from *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology*), 2nd edition, revised and expanded, Nashville: Church Street Press, 1995, 83-84. Used with permission.

The Day of Resurrection

The day of resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad;
The Passover of gladness; the Passover of God.
From death to life eternal, from earth unto the sky,
Our Christ has brought of over with hymns of victory.

Our hearts be pure from evil, that we may see aright
The Lord in rays eternal of resurrection light;
And, listening to His accents, may hear, so calm and plain,
His own "All hail" and, hearing, may raise the victor strain.

Now let the heavens be joyful! Let earth her song begin!
The world resound in triumph, and all that is therein;
Let all things seen and unseen their notes of gladness blend;
For Christ the Lord has risen, our joy that has no end.

Tune: LANCASHIRE, Henry T. Smart, 1835

Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain

Come, ye faithful, raise he strain of triumphant gladness,
God has brought forth Israel into joy from sadness;
Loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke Jacob's sons and daughters,
Led them with unmoistened foot through the Red Sea waters.

'Tis the spring of souls today; Christ hath burst his prison,
and from three days' sleep in death as a sun hath risen!
All the winter of our sins, long and bleak, is flying
From His light to whom we give, laud and praise undying.

Now the brightest season dawns with the day of splendor,
Now the royal feast of feasts comes its joy to render;
Comes to glad Jerusalem, who with true affection
Welcomes in unwearied strains Jesus' resurrection.

Tune: ST. KEVIN, Arthur S. Sullivan, 1872