Biblical Perspectives Magazine **Volume 23, Number 49, November 28 to December 4, 2021**

Hymns of the Faith:
"The God of Abraham Praise"

By Dr. Bill Wymond

A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is "Hymns of the Faith," brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for "Hymns of the Faith."…. And now with "Hymns of the Faith" is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan, and I'm here with you and with Derek Thomas for "Hymns of the Faith." It is our joy every Lord's Day morning to come together and reflect on the rich deposit of truth and devotion which has been given to us in our hymnals. We in the English-speaking world do not live in a day and age where hymns are at the apex of their popularity, but we do live in a time where we have access to information about and to a rich collection of hymnody in English, much of which has come to us from other cultures and times. Long before the English-speaking peoples were converted to Christ and learning the gospel, some of the songs that we now sing in English were written.

Today we're singing a song that has very ancient roots, although the specific text and the form of this tune really come to us from the eighteenth century. And we're also going to be studying about the author of this hymn. We have actually a good bit of biographical information about him. That's not always the case. I would mention to those of you who are interested in hymnody in the listening audience that you should beware of popular books on hymns and some of the assertions that they make about the hymn context and the author. Make sure if you're reading hymnology that you're reading recognized experts in hymnody, because it's amazing how many frankly fabricated stories show up in some of these paperback books on hymns that you can pick up even in Christian bookstores. I don't know why it is that funny stories are made up about authors and hymns, but there are. But there are a lot of really good and reliable sources on hymnody that are available. Maybe we can even mention some of the names today.

But the author of this particular hymn, Thomas Olivers, is a character that we know a good bit about. And he was born in Wales, Derek!

Dr. Thomas: He was; in 1725 in Tregy-non (near New-town), Mont-gom-er-y-shire, which is in northeast Wales.

Dr. Duncan: I'm going to ask you more about him in just a few moments, but I think when the listening audience hears this tune that they're going to immediately recognize that it has a little different sound from the hymn tunes that we've been studying over the last few weeks. The song is called *The God of Abraham Praise,* but they have all three of those syllables on one note, so it kind of comes out as *Abram* when you're singing it. It's by Thomas Olivers, but the tune of this hymn (which I'm guessing, Bill, that Olivers had some part of putting together in the form that we have it now) actually came from the synagogue in some form. Let's hear it, and then you can tell us a little bit about it, Bill. [Dr. Wymond plays hymn.] I like that tune!

Dr. Thomas: It sounds pining. It sounds a little on the minor side for a hymn that begins, "The God of Abraham praise!" You might be expecting something more in a major key, but it sounds yearning. It sounds very Yiddish, but of course it is! It's from the Jewish synagogue. But I was wondering…that wouldn't be the beat of a typical synagogue…?

Dr. Wymond: Well, actually now as it's used in a synagogue it's used that way. If you go to our local synagogue, oftentimes they will end their service with this particular hymn. That's the place that it is used, or at the beginning of the morning service. It's used at the end of the evening service…or, if they would have a morning service.

The tune earlier had a little bit more of a beat to it. It went… [plays]. And then that was sort of the way that I think it was first used, even in the Welsh way.

Dr. Duncan: So would it have been sung freely by the cantor? Would it have been free in terms of…? Almost like a jazz singer would ad lib something? Would there be that kind of free phrasing?

Dr. Wymond: Probably a little bit more. Of course it would not have been accompanied. But the tune itself probably has roots in folk song — Russian, Spanish folk songs. And it was known even to the composer, Smetana. You will know this…you're probably thinking, Derek, since you know so much about symphonic music (and you certainly do), about Smetana's symphony called *Moravia*, where the tune is used like this…[plays].

Dr. Thomas: There are some very Jewish-sounding chords!

Dr. Duncan: I was going to say, some people are going to be listening to that and they're going to be thinking about *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Dr. Wymond: Well, it is. So many of the Jewish folk songs are in a minor key; even the Jewish national anthem is in a minor key. And they have a really haunting quality about them, don't they? And so that's why this great hymn of praise has this minor tune, because it has those folk song roots.

Dr. Duncan: So Thomas Olivers had gone to a synagogue service, and had heard this very, very famous Jewish cantor singing. Is that what the story?

Dr. Wymond: Yes, he heard this cantor whose name was Meyer Lyon, and so now the tune is called LEONI because of Myer Lyon, who introduced it. Meyer Lyon had gotten it from earlier tradition, and from this folk song tradition and so on like that. And so after Olivers heard this, he was so impressed with the song and with the text that he went back (and I will let you all talk about this)…but he went back and composed a hymn based on the text, the *Yigdal*, as it's known in Hebrew. And so this man, I think, who arranged the tune was sort of an interesting fellow in that he not only sang in the great synagogue there in London at Duke's Place, but also he was a singer in the theater in Drury Lane and Covent Garden…but he didn't do so well. One writer says in sort of quaint, probably eighteenth century or nineteenth century language, that "he had a sweet voice in melody, but in every other respect was unsuited for the stage, and his appearance was a failure."

Dr. Thomas: Choir directors! What do they know?! [*Laughter*]

Dr. Wymond: Isn't that a very kind way of saying he was an ugly fellow, probably? But then later he became a cantor in Jamaica — in synagogues in Jamaica. And he died in Jamaica.

Dr. Thomas: Among the Ashkenazi, Jews of German descent who had fled to Jamaica to escape the Inquisition.

Dr. Duncan: Umhmm. And the Ashkenazi — you've got us in the exile right now [I'm referring to Derek Thomas' preaching through Ezra and Nehemiah on Sunday nights] and so, do you want to tell us about the Ashkenazi…sort of Diaspora of Jews? This is a group with roots back to Persia and Babylon, and it's a very distinct sort of tradition within the various lineages of the Jewish culture. And so you'll hear people named Ashkenazi as a surname out of that particular tradition, and…

Dr. Thomas: The pianist and great conductor, Vladimir Ashkenazi, went by another name for a while until it became popular again to use the Jewish names. And from that same branch of Judaism.

Dr. Duncan: And, Bill, I know that during the days of the…I should say "the early church", but to us it's early church…say, in the third century. By the third century as relations between Jewish and Christian communities are settling down a little.

There was of course a lot of tension in the first century and the second century, but by the third century you have early church fathers like Origen actually going to Hebrew rabbis and asking them, 'Would you teach me Hebrew?' And you certainly have this in the Reformation, where you have major Reformation figures studying Hebrew with rabbis. Starting in the Renaissance, you know, you have people getting really interested in the original languages and wanting to learn Hebrew and going to rabbis. And where better to go to learn Hebrew? But it struck me as kind of interesting that Thomas Olivers, who is associated with the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century, would have been at a synagogue service. Do you know anything about the interaction between Christians and Jews in England of that time? Was this in London that he would have heard him?

Dr. Wymond: Yes. This was at the great synagogue in London, and I think probably this cantor was reputed to be such a good singer that sometimes people were drawn just because of the music, and to hear the music.

This ancient tune, although it has folk song roots, fascinates me because they have found evidence that early Gregorian chant tunes were very much like early Jewish tunes, and that some of the Gregorian chant probably has its origins as far back as even pre-Christian times. So the tunes that they're using are reflective of tunes that may have been used in the synagogue or even in the temple.

Dr. Duncan: Now, speaking of which, I want to harp on this hymn tune for a little bit, because it is unique amongst the hymn tunes — at least that we sing. I know that in some hymnals I have seen it claimed that this particular tune has very early roots. I've seen people put, like, seventh century or sixth century on it. Do you know anything about this particular melody or tune? I mean, obviously it was being used in the synagogue in the seventeenth century, but are you aware of hymnologists that have indicated a previous form of it much earlier than the seventeenth century, or from the Middle Ages? I'm looking on the page…our hymnbook just indicates that the tune was arranged and dates from this Meyer Lyon gentleman in 1770. But I've also seen earlier dates put on the origin of the tune. Do you know anything about that?

Dr. Wymond: There are some just vague references to ….

Dr. Duncan: So we really just don't know how far the tune itself would have gone back?

Dr. Wymond: Not really.

Dr. Duncan: Okay. Well, Derek, the author himself is interesting. Thomas Olivers was born in Wales, but apparently (just from references that we have to him later in life) must have had a fairly dramatic conversion that indicated some significant lifestyle changes. Tell us a little bit about Thomas Olivers, the author of this

hymn.

Dr. Thomas: He was born in 1725, in Wales. He lived throughout the eighteenth century until 1799. At the time of the Great Awakening (and we're thinking of the Wesley's and Whitefield, and over in these parts, Jonathan Edwards), he was in his late, middle to late…teens or so. His parents died when he was four, and he's apprenticed probably at a very young age. I have no idea how old he would have been; possibly as young as ten, which would have put him something like John Bunyan, who equally was apprenticed at that age, to a shoe maker. And then as a teenager he apparently began to lead something of a dissolute life…became notorious for wickedness in a parish "where sin abounded," according to one biographer. He was apparently driven out of his native village, and then comes to Bristol, where some of George Whitefield's most famous sermons were preached and where an extraordinary revival takes place. If you read the biographies of George Whitefield, for example, or of the Great Awakening, there's an extraordinary revival among coal miners…Whitfield, the famous story of the coal miners.

Dr. Duncan: …the streaks down the blackened cheeks of these…. Coal miners were brave, tough men, especially in those days.

Dr. Thomas: He says that when he began…"When the sermon began," Olivers records later, "I was certainly a dreadful enemy of God and to all that is good, and one of the most profligate and abandoned young men living." But he comes under conviction of sin and wrestles for several days in prayer, until finally he finds peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. He then seems to come under the wing of John Wesley, who recognizes some of his potential and persuades him to become one of Wesley's many evangelists…travels with Wesley throughout England and Ireland, preaching…encountering some of the opposition that one has read about recently in the recent Wesley anniversary, for example. Not just of vocal opposition, but of violent opposition at times. He is buried in London, in Wesley's tomb, in the City Road Chapel burying ground. I don't have this right in front of me now, but he was described as "a rough-hewn stick," or words to that effect.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, Wesley writes those words to a gentleman, Christopher Hopper, in 1762: "I'm glad that you have him. There is good in him, though he is a rough stick of wood," is the way Wesley describes him.

Dr. Thomas: He's the editor of a Methodist magazine for a short time…apparently wrote some other hymns, too.

Dr. Duncan: Yes…now, Bill, off-air beforehand, you told us…I didn't recognize the tune, though Derek did immediately…he wrote a tune called HELMSLEY. And though he didn't write the tune to *The God of Abraham Praise,* he did write this tune. I thought it would be interesting for the listening audience to hear a

snippet of this tune HELMSLEY that Thomas Olivers wrote.

Dr. Wymond: It's sort of an interesting tune, in that it has an eighteenth century character about it, one aspect of which is that it's a *long* tune! It has many different sections to it. [Plays.]

Dr. Thomas: Yes, that's the tune that's used in Britain to this day to John Cennick's *Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending*, “once for favored sinners slain.” And then that refrain…there's a refrain that goes, “Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.”

Dr. Wymond: Yes, that's in the second stanza, and that's actually the hymn from which I was playing that. It's a busy tune, in addition to being long…a lot to it. It's one of those that the congregation would have to do a lot, but once they learned it…

Dr. Duncan: They’d have it down! Yes, they could do it in their sleep, couldn't they?

And the tune, the song that we're focusing on today, *The God of Abraham Praise*, zeroes in on the person of God and His promise of a land. I think that's interesting in light of the synagogue setting of the tune, and of hearing that text used at the end of the synagogue service, and the way that Olivers described coming back and, as it were, “Christianizing” the language of the text that he had heard.

And Derek, the first two stanzas really focus upon the God of Abraham, the one who is the Ancient of everlasting days, the God of love, the great I AM. There's almost a repetition of the names of God in those first two stanzas.

Dr. Thomas: And of course the reference is to Exodus 3: “I AM that I AM,” God giving His name to Moses, which is extremely important in synagogue liturgy, in Jewish liturgy, as it is in Christian liturgy, of course. One of the definitive texts in the Old Testament. If you want to go to the Old Testament to see where you find the doctrine of God revealed, well, Exodus 3 is certainly one of those passages.

Dr. Duncan: And of course, our dear friend Alex Motyer's meditation, *The Revelation of the Divine Name*…I can still remember first reading his exposition of the divine name and of the significance of those names used in the early chapters of Exodus, and how riveting it was. And then there's a transition into a focus on the covenant itself, the covenant which God has made:

“He by himself hath sworn, I on His oath depend;
I shall, on eagles’ wings upborne, to heav’n ascend.”

And here now you get a sort of Exodus 19 reference to “I have borne you on

eagles' wings," as God speaks to the children of Israel as they are at Mount Sinai, having been liberated from Egypt. And then there's the picture that cuts to the end of Numbers, or the end of Deuteronomy, where they're right on the verge of the Promised Land: "The goodly land I see…"

Now, we only have six stanzas in our hymnal, Derek, but you were doing some research on this and you came up with how many stanzas in this hymn?

Dr. Thomas: Ten! And one of them I like a lot. A couple of them have poetry that's a little doggerel, but this third stanza (which isn't in any hymnbook that I've seen)…

"Though nature's strength decay, and earth and hell withstand,
To Canaan's bounds we urge our way, at His command.
The watery deep we pass, with Jesus in our view,
And through the howling wilderness our way pursue."

Dr. Duncan: Now this is a great example of taking an Old Testament text and viewing it through the lens of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. We've talked about this a little bit with Watts and the Psalms, but Olivers is doing this with the whole Exodus narrative here, isn't he?

Dr. Thomas: He is, and it's interesting to think of Olivers listening to a Jewish service (the reasons why he's doing it are unknown to us), but perhaps "Christianizing" the Hebrew Old Testament text as he's going along:

"Before the Savior's face the ransomed nations bow,
O'erwhelmed at His almighty grace, forever new.
He shows His prints of love; they kindle to a flame,
And sound through all the worlds above the slaughtered Lamb."

The poetry and metaphor is somewhat complicated, and perhaps that's the reason why that particular stanza was dropped. But it's got this–well, I was going to use the word *eschatological*–but it's got this view of the consummation of all things, in terms of "the ransomed nations." This is of course the beginning of the birth of what we call the modern missions movement in the eighteenth century, when Christians (Wesley, Whitefield, Olivers, and others) were very concerned about the nations that were now discovered and being populated, and how these too had a part to play in the kingdom of God…and seeing the gospel spreading to the nations. And it has this "missions" feel to it — a good hymn to sing at a time of a Missions Conference, for example.

Dr. Duncan: It closes with a wonderful doxology:

"The whole triumphant host gives thanks to God on high:
'Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!' they ever cry.

Hail, Abraham's God and mine! I join the heav'nly lays;
All might and majesty are thine, and endless praise."

So it really does. There's a wonderful climax in worship with that sort of missions emphasis and that heading to the end kind of emphasis throughout the tune.

Bill, let's listen to this great hymn.

Dr. Wymond: Singing *The God of Abraham Praise* will be Victor Smith.

> The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above,
> Ancient of everlasting days and God of love.
> Jehovah! Great I AM! By earth and heav'n confessed;
> I bow and bless the sacred name, forever blest.
>
> The God of Abraham praise, at whose supreme command
> From earth I rise, and seek the joys at His right hand.
> I all on earth forsake, its wisdom, fame, and pow'r,
> And Him my only portion make, my shield and tow'r.
>
> He by himself hath sworn, I on H is oath depend;
> I shall, on eagles' wings upborne, to heav'n ascend.
> I shall behold His face, I shall His pow'r adore,
> And sing the wonders of His grace forevermore.
>
> The goodly land I see, with peace and plenty blest,
> A land of sacred liberty and endless rest.
> There milk and honey flow, and oil and wine abound,
> And trees of life forever grow, with mercy crowned.
>
> There dwells the Lord our King, the Lord our Righteousness,
> Triumphant o'er the world and sin, the Prince of Peace.
> On Zion's sacred height His kingdom He maintains,
> And glorious with His saints in light forever reigns.
>
> The whole triumphant host give thanks to God on high:
> 'Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!' they ever cry.
> Hail, Abraham's God and mine! I join the heav'nly lays;
> All might and majesty are thine, and endless praise.

established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.