

THE BIRTH OF MORMON HYMNODY

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"And it shall be given thee, also, to make a selection of sacred hymns, as it shall be given thee, which is pleasing unto me, to be had in my church." Thus was recorded the word of the Lord through the mouth of the prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., at Harmony, Pennsylvania in July, 1830, and directed to his wife, Emma Smith. This verse from the *Doctrine and Covenants* (25:11) gave impetus to the rise of Mormon hymnody.

Research has failed to reveal the procedures Emma Smith used in selecting hymns in accordance with her assignment of July, 1830. By the beginning of 1831, the headquarters of the new Church were moved to Kirtland, Ohio, a small frontier village which had been established only a few years earlier. The struggles and oppositions experienced by the new Saints no doubt delayed Emma's assignment to make a selection of hymns, and, consequently, the publication of the first hymn book. She also had trials of her own, having given birth to twins in April, 1830, who lived only a few hours. In addition, there were numerous responsibilities which befell the wife of the Prophet. Even with these trials there is evidence that Emma was diligent in her assignment to make a "selection of sacred hymns." It should be noted that all references to hymns in this article are to *hymn texts only* unless otherwise noted. There were no hymn tunes printed by the Church during the period covered by this article, all hymns were sung to borrowed tunes. At a council meeting held in Independence, Missouri, on May 1, 1832, W. W. Phelps was instructed to correct and print the hymns which had been selected by Emma Smith in fulfillment of her charge. It is not known what was meant by "to correct"—possibly Phelps was to make a careful check of those hymns selected in regard to doctrine, or it may have referred merely to a matter of proofreading.

First Publication of Hymns

The first hymns for the Church were published in June, 1832, in the initial issue of the *Evening and Morning Star*, under the heading "HYMNS." Three of these hymns appear in the present *Hymns* (1950): "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," by John Newton, the Anglican Reverend (1779); "Redeemer of Israel," ascribed to W. W. Phelps, but actually paraphrased by Phelps from a hymn by Joseph Swain of England called "O Thou In Whose Presence"; and "He Died! the Great Redeemer Died," by Watts. Nearly all subsequent issues of the *Evening and Morning Star* contained one or more hymns, mostly borrowed from protestant hymnals, although some issues listed "New Hymns." For example, the September, 1832, issue contained the hymn "Earth With Her Ten Thousand Flowers," attributed to William W. Phelps, although there is some question as to the authenticity of authorship. This hymn is also in the present *Hymns* (1950), with Phelps being credited as the author.

Subjects of these original hymns include persecution experienced by the Saints ("Children of Zion Awake from Your Sadness," found only in the reprint edition of October, 1832), missionary work ("Farewell Our Friends and Brethren," in the same issue), revelation ("An Angel Came Down from the Regions of Glory," February, 1833), and the last dispensation ("Now Let Us Rejoice in the Day of Salvation," March, 1833). Other subjects reflected in the hymns of this early publication include baptism and the sacrament. A hymn of great appeal which appeared in the September 1832 issue was "Guide Us, O Thou Great Jehovah." This hymn, translated by Robert Robinson, is found in the 1950 hymnal.

On July 20, 1833, a mob of angry citizens totaling some four or five hundred persons assembled in the city of Independence, Missouri, to demand a stop to all Mormon publications. The elders of the Church pleaded with the group to give them time to clear up matters. Unresponsive to their plea, the mob demolished the printing press, the type, and even the building of W. W. Phelps and Company Printing Office, thus suspending the publication of the *Evening and Morning Star* until December of that year, when the next issue was printed in Kirtland, Ohio.

Very few hymns were printed in the remaining issues of the *Evening and Morning Star* before its publication was discontinued in September, 1834. Only one original hymn appeared during this time, and it was in the last issue, "There Is a Land the Lord Will Bless," by W. W. Phelps. It is probable that many of the hymns selected for printing had been lost in the destruction of the press.

Of the thirty-three hymns printed in the original issues of the *Evening and Morning Star*, ten have survived in the present *Hymns*. Of these, six were by Church members. Five of the six were written by W. W. Phelps: "Redeemer of Israel," "Earth With Her Ten Thousand Flowers," "We're Not Ashamed to Own Our Lord," "Now Let Us Rejoice in the Day of Salvation," and "Awake! O Ye People, the Savior Is Coming." The other indigenous hymn is "The Happy Day Has Rolled On," by Philo Dibble. The four non-indigenous hymns appearing in the present hymnal are: "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," by John Newton; "He Died! the Great Redeemer Died" and "Joy to the World" by Isaac Watts; and "Guide Us, O Thou Great Jehovah," translated by Robert Robinson.

William Wines Phelps

William Wines Phelps was born in New Jersey in 1792. He was about forty years of age when he joined the Church. He had had considerable experience as a printer and editor in New York before going to Ohio, and also had been active in politics. In June, 1831, just after his arrival in Kirtland, he was directed by Joseph Smith to "assist Oliver Cowdery in doing work of printing and of selecting and writing books for schools in the Church" (D & C 2:86). Phelps was soon sent to Independence, Missouri, where he was placed in charge of the Church's publishing house. Among the leaders who endeavored to quell uprisings against Church members in Jackson County, he was made one of the presidency of the stake in Clay County. He was a writer of considerable ability, and a number of his hymns, characterized by their forthright expressions of the Church's new doctrines, are still popular today.

At the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, March 27, 1836, four of the six hymns sung by the choir were by Phelps. No indication is given as to whether the congregation participated with the choir in singing. The tunes to which the hymns were sung were all familiar and were listed in the account of the services. The final

hymn of the meeting was Phelps' "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning." This hymn has been sung at all the temple dedications of the Church.

Phelps moved from Kirtland back to Missouri and then to Nauvoo, Illinois, with the main body of the Saints. Here he was active in town government, education, and writing. For a long period he served as secretary to Joseph Smith.

When the Saints were driven from Nauvoo in 1846 and began the trek westward, Phelps remained in Nauvoo to settle certain business transactions for the Church. He was sent east to purchase a printing press, which arrived in Salt Lake in 1850, a year after his arrival. Phelps continued his assignment as publisher and editor for the Church until his death in 1872.

Although Phelps made worthy contributions to the Church in printing, education, government, and exploration, his greatest contribution was unquestionably his hymns which today still express the emotions and beliefs of "a new religion." One writer has described them as possessing a loftiness that carries one to splendid heights of thought. Phelps has been called an idealist who attempted to carry his people with him through the medium of poetry.

Continued Early Publication of Hymns

The *Evening and Morning Star* was published in Kirtland for about ten months, after which the name was changed to the *Latter-Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*. Oliver Cowdery was editor, assisted by John Whitmer and W. W. Phelps.

The practice of printing hymns was resumed in the *Messenger and Advocate* as had been the case in the *Evening and Morning Star*. Apparently Emma Smith's assignment to select hymns was still in force. The first hymn to appear was "The Red Man," by Phelps, in the December, 1834 issue. Two more hymns by Phelps, "This World Was Once a Garden Place" and "Gently Raise the Sacred Strain" appeared in the June, 1835, issue. The following issue (July, 1835) was the first to print hymn tunes. Two tunes were included with two of Phelps' hymns, "Awake for the Morning Is Come" (set to "Chinese Chant") and "O God, Th' Eternal Father" (set to "From Greenlands Icy Mountains").

The first printed hymn by Eliza R. Snow, one of the foremost writers in the early Church, appeared in August, 1835, "Praise Ye the Lord—Great Is the Lord: 'Tis Good to Praise His High and Holy Name." Seven of the eight original verses are to be found in the present *Hymns*. Another of her hymns, "The Glorious Day Is Rolling On," was printed in January, 1836.

Nine other hymns by Phelps were printed in ensuing issues including what is perhaps his most popular composition, "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning" (January, 1836).

Of the five remaining unmentioned hymns which were printed in the *Messenger and Advocate*, one was a New Year's song by Parley P. Pratt, who had a number of hymns in Emma Smith's collection of 1835. The four hymns which cannot definitely be assigned authorship were likely penned by a Church member because their texts allude to the Latter-day Saint organization. They were: "How Good It Is To Sing" (February, 1836), "Arise, Ye Saints of Latter Days" (March, 1836), "I Have No Home, Where Shall I Go" (August, 1836), and "What Wondrous Things We Now Behold" (October, 1836). The latter two had been printed in the *Evening and Morning Star* two years before. With the publication of the Church's first official hymnal, it was no longer necessary to use the *Messenger and Advocate* as the primary vehicle for published hymns.

The First Latter-day Saint Hymn Book

On September 14, 1835, in a meeting of the High Council of the Presidency of Kirtland, it was decided that "Sister Emma Smith proceed to make a selection of Sacred Hymns, according to the revelation; and that President W. W. Phelps be appointed to revise and arrange them for printing. Later that same year, the first hymnal was printed by F. G. Williams and Company. The book was small and the title page contained the following:

A COLLECTION
of
SACRED HYMNS
for the
CHURCH
of the
LATTER DAY SAINTS

selected by Emma Smith

Kirtland, Ohio
Printed by F. G. Williams & Co.
1835

Following the title page was the following preface:

In order to sing by the spirit, and with the understanding, it is necessary that the Church of the Latter Day Saints should have a collection of "Sacred Hymns," adapted to their faith and belief in the gospel, and, as far as can be, holding forth the promises made to the fathers who died in the precious faith of a glorious resurrection, and a thousand years' reign on earth with the Son of Man in His glory. Notwithstanding, the Church, as it were, is still in its infancy, yet, as the song of the righteous is a prayer unto God, it is sincerely hoped that the following collection, selected with an eye single to His glory, may answer every purpose till more are composed, or till we are blessed with a copious variety of the songs of Zion.

Emma's first assignment had been completed. The small book contained ninety hymns (texts only). Of these, thirty-nine had already appeared in either the *Morning and Evening Star* or the *Messenger and Advocate*, and of these thirty-nine, thirty are accredited to W. W. Phelps, five to Parley P. Pratt, two to Eliza R. Snow, and one each to Philo Dibble and Edward Partridge, all of whom were Latter-day Saints. The current hymnal contains twenty-eight hymns from this first collection, fourteen of which were composed by Mormon musicians. The hymns were grouped in this first edition under the following classifications: Morning Hymns, Evening Hymns, Farewell Hymns, On Baptism, Sacrament, On Marriage and Miscellaneous. There is an alphabetical index by first line of the hymn and author.

Emma Smith responded to her call admirably. The new Church called for a unique hymnody and her collection contained some of the best hymns from other churches and an impressive group of hymn verse from Mormon writers. A tribute to her taste and judgment is the fact that some of her selections have been joyfully sung by the Saints for over a hundred and forty years. Her little collection represented not only the birth, but a vigorous beginning to a varied and interesting history of Mormon hymnology.