

# Poetic Borrowing in Early Mormonism

*Michael Hicks*

**T**he Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it seems, has had little use for poetry that cannot be sung. The chief place of verse has always been the hymnal, and not without reason: songs can be relied upon to teach principles through simply sung couplets. This was no doubt very important in times when literacy among the American Saints was less abundant than today. More doctrine had to be learned by ear. Sacred hymns and songs, then as now, distilled dogma into memorable rhymes and turns of melody, while congregational singing itself strengthened the group spirit of the Mormon community.

For the purposes of the Church, some hymns could be borrowed outright from the Protestants. Others needed tailoring to fit Mormon thought. Words were often recast, but old tunes were kept for the power and practical value of familiarity — the early hymnbooks had no printed music.<sup>1</sup>

Many of those lyrics which now strike us as peculiarly Mormon were modeled by the Church's leading poets after folk hymns, ballads, and patriotic songs. They are stepchildren of once popular songs that have long since been buried. Uncovering the tunes to which many Mormon verses were originally sung (as identified in their first journal publications) often reveals textual models which demonstrate how Saints like W. W. Phelps, Eliza R. Snow, and John Taylor, in their own ways, sought to turn the water of popular culture into the new wine of the kingdom.

W. W. Phelps, well-known among Latter-day Saints as an author of hymns, should more properly be known as the foremost reviser of hymns in early Mor-

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest LDS hymnal to include musical notation was the unofficial work by J. C. Little and G. B. Gardner, *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the use of The Latter Day Saints* (Bellows Falls, VT: Blake and Bailey, 1844), which gave the melody and a bass line for each hymn.

mondom.<sup>2</sup> The back pages of the *Evening and Morning Star* display his flair for Mormonizing Protestant sacred songs. A familiar example is his transformation of Joseph Swain's (1761–96) "O Thou in Whose Presence" into "Redeemer of Israel."<sup>3</sup>

*Joseph Swain*

O thou in whose presence  
 my soul takes delight,  
 On whom in affliction I call,  
 My comfort by day and my  
 song in the night,  
 My hope, my salvation, my all.

. . .

Or why should I wander  
 an alien from thee,  
 Or cry in the desert for bread?  
 Thy foes will rejoice when my  
 sorrows they'll see,  
 And smile at the tears I have shed.

*W. W. Phelps*

Redeemer of Israel,  
 our only delight,  
 On whom for a blessing we call,  
 Our shadow by day and our  
 pillar by night,  
 Our king, our deliverer, our all.

. . .

How long we have wandered  
 as strangers in sin  
 And cried in the desert for thee.  
 Our foes have rejoiced when our  
 sorrows they've seen,  
 But Israel will shortly be free.

Phelps depersonalizes Swain's devotional lyrics and introduces allusions to the Israelite wilderness epic, with which, even then, the Saints strongly identified their own story. Christ becomes the deliverer of his nation rather than the intimate savior. "Thy foes" become "our foes" who not only *will* rejoice at Israel's troubles, but already have.

Phelps follows a similar pattern in his adaptation of Isaac Watts's (1674–1748) popular "Not Ashamed of the Gospel," which he rechristens "New Jerusalem."<sup>4</sup>

*Isaac Watts*

I'm not ashamed to own my Lord  
 Or to defend his cause,  
 Maintain the honor of his world,  
 The glory of his cross.

Jesus, my God, I know his name:  
 His name is all my trust.

*W. W. Phelps*

We're not ashamed to own our Lord,  
 And worship him on earth.  
 We love to learn his holy word,  
 And know what souls are worth.

When Jesus comes as flaming flame  
 For to reward the just,

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed study of Phelps's hymnwriting, see Helen Hanks Macaré "The Singing Saints" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1961), pp. 83–102, 114–20, 552–54.

<sup>3</sup> *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (June 1832): [8] Swain's hymn, to the tune "Davis" (from which "Redeemer of Israel" is adapted), remains popular in Protestant hymnals to this day. Because of the many variant versions of hymn punctuation, and for clarity's sake in comparing texts, I have often standardized the punctuation of the hymns cited in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Though obscure, Phelps's hymn remains in the current LDS hymnbook, *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), no. 266. See also *Evening and Morning Star*, 1 (Oct. 1832): [40].

Nor will he put my soul to shame,  
Nor let my hope be lost.

The world will know the only name  
In which the saints can trust.

. . .

. . .

Then will he own my worthless name  
Before his Father's face,  
And in the New Jerusalem  
Appoint my soul a place.

Then he will give us a new name  
With robes of righteousness,  
And in the New Jerusalem  
Eternal happiness.

The reference to the New Jerusalem in Watts's last verse apparently struck a chord in Phelps that resonates through all the changes he made in this text. The inward, reflective poem becomes in Phelps's version a vision of Christ's imminent return, judgment, and physical reign on earth. Significantly, in so early a poem, Phelps deletes the penitent's "worthless name" in favor of the "new name."

A final example of this type of early hymn adaptation is Phelps's version of one of the most familiar of hymns, "Joy to the World." The altered hymn, like "New Jerusalem" and "Redeemer of Israel," remains in current Latter-day Saint hymnbooks, although the new name Phelps gave it, "The Second Coming of the Savior," is omitted.<sup>5</sup> By a simple change of verb tense in the first lines, Phelps bends Watts's meditation on the Nativity into a shout for Christ's return.

*Watts*

*Phelps*

Joy to the world,  
the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her king!

Joy to the world,  
the Lord will come,  
And earth receive her king!

In the next lines Phelps changes the impersonal "heaven and nature" into "saints and angels": those who appear with Christ at his coming, and those who await him. Many similar changes follow, including the substitution of Watts's last verse with a completely new one dealing with the people of God — Israel, who, as Phelps puts it, "spread abroad, like stars that glitter in the sky, and ever worship God."

Several years after these revisions, Phelps published his best-known religious lyric, "Hosanna to God and the Lamb," known today by its first line, "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning." This hymn freely borrows from the patriotic folk song, "The American Star," which Phelps intended as the original tune.<sup>6</sup> "The American Star" begins with the words, "The spirits of Washington, Warren, Montgomery," then goes on to praise these heroes of the Revolution who yet watch over nineteenth-century patriots. Beside the first

<sup>5</sup> *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (Dec. 1832): [56]. Macaré, on quite scanty evidence, suggests that Phelps did not adapt this himself but borrowed an existing Protestant adaptation of Watts.

<sup>6</sup> *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2 (Jan. 1836): 256. For the text and tune (first published 1859?) of "The American Star," see George Pullen Jackson, *Another Sheaf of White Spirituals* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1952), pp. 92–93.

words, vestiges of “The American Star” remain in “Hosanna to God and the Lamb.” The choruses to both songs are based on military images. One speaks of the U.S. militia (“let millions invade us, we’ll meet them undaunted”), the other of heaven (“we’ll sing and we’ll shout with the armies of heaven”). The patriotic song declares that “to us the high boon by the gods have [sic] been granted.” Phelps elaborates on this: “We . . . begin to inherit the visions and blessings and glories of God.” “The American Star” urges all “to spread the glad tidings of liberty far.” Phelps urges the Saints “to spread forth the kingdom of heaven abroad.”

Phelps dominated Mormon letters during the Church’s infancy. As the grand old man of Mormon hymnody he left notable precedents for the poetic borrowing that would go on in Nauvoo. By 1839 the practice he had fostered was already so firmly a part of the Mormon literary scene that Emma Smith, in a call for new sacred lyrics, requested those of “poetical genius” to send her “newly composed or revised” hymns.<sup>7</sup> The new poetic borrowing at Nauvoo, however, differed from Phelps’s in at least one respect: the end of the Missouri oppressions and the beginning of Illinois prosperity brought a rapprochement with secular culture. The Mississippi left not only boatloads of converts on the Nauvoo shores but also every class of non-Mormon sightseer. Once the malaria plagues had been quelled, the river life of emigrants and tourists began to lend its high spirits and worldly exuberance to Nauvoo. These high spirits blaze in the Latter-day Saint songs of that period.

The first poems published by the Illinois Mormons, however, are still shaded by Missouri: “The Slaughter on Shoal Creek,”<sup>8</sup> “Zion in Captivity: A Lamentation,”<sup>9</sup> and “Song for the Exiled Saints.”<sup>10</sup> In “Song,” Eliza R. Snow revamps the folk song, “Sweet Home,” found in current LDS hymnbooks as “Mid Pleasures and Palaces.” Reversing the order of the original’s rhyming words, Snow begins her “Song” with a dark brooding on the Saints’ wanderings.

John Howard Payne

’Mid pleasure and palaces  
though we may roam,  
Be it ever so humble,  
there’s no place like home.

Eliza R. Snow

We are far, far away from the  
land of our Home,  
And like strangers in exile  
we’re destined to roam.

Payne’s poem then recounts the narrator’s nostalgia. He calls himself “an exile from home” seeking for “that peace of mind, dearer than all.” Snow’s lyrics

<sup>7</sup> *Times and Seasons* 1 (Nov. 1840): 204, emphasis in original. Phelps apparently saw no practical distinction between his role as author and adapter — as evidenced by his tacitly accepting credit for authoring hymn texts he only adapted. A most striking example of this is the case of “Earth, with Her Ten Thousand Flowers,” written by Thomas L. Taylor and probably adapted by Phelps, but consistently credited to Phelps in LDS hymnbooks. See Marcaré, “Singing Saints,” pp. 126–27, and *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (Sept. 1832): [32].

<sup>8</sup> Eliza R. Snow, *Times and Seasons* 1 (Dec. 1839): [32].

<sup>9</sup> Parley P. Pratt, *Times and Seasons* 1 (Feb. 1840): [64].

<sup>10</sup> *Times and Seasons* 1 (Nov. 1840): [207].

chronicle the sufferings of her people in their dogged search for a home, the New Jerusalem of which Phelps had so often sung. Snow's song, of course, follows Phelps's pattern of changing personal devotion into communal support. Moreover, Snow's "Song for the Exiled Saints" attempts to turn the mere wistfulness of the well-known song into sacred history.<sup>11</sup>

A later and happier transformation of a popular song is the anonymous parody, "The God That Others Worship."<sup>12</sup> (This song became a Utah folk-

### THE ROSE THAT ALL ARE PRAISING.

T. H. BAVLY.  
EDWARD J. LODER.

1. The rose that all are prais-ing, Is not the rose for me; Too ma - ny eyes are  
2. The gem a king might cov - et Is not the gem for me; From darkness who would  
3. Gay birds in ca - ges pin - ing, Are not the birds for me; The plumes so bright-ly

gaz - ing, Up - on the cost - ly tree; But there's a rose in yon - der glen, That  
move it, Save that the world may see; But I've a gem that shuns dis - play, And  
shin - ing, Would fain fly off from thee; But I've a bird that gai - lysings, Though

shuns the gaze of oth - er men, For me its blos - som rais - ing, Oh! that's the rose for  
next my heart worn ev' - ry day, So dear - ly do I love it; Oh! that's the gem for  
free to rove, she folds her wings, For me her flight re - sign - ing, Oh! that's the bird for

me; Oh! that's the rose for me; Oh! that's the rose for me.  
me; Oh! that's the gem for me; Oh! that's the gem for me.  
me; Oh! that's the bird for me; Oh! that's the bird for me.

The source for the Nauvoo parody "The God That Others Worship" and John Taylor's exodus song, "The Upper California." From J. P. McCaskey, ed., *Franklin Square Song Collection*, 8 vols. (New York: Harper, 1881-91), 3: 136.

<sup>11</sup> Though there are a number of folk hymns I am aware of that took the name "Sweet Home," the structure of Snow's verse is closest to the Payne poem.

<sup>12</sup> *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 Feb. 1845): 799; also *Nauvoo Neighbor* 2 (5 Feb. 1845): [3].

lore favorite, sometimes with titles deriving from other verses: "A Church Without a Gathering," and "A Church Without a Prophet.") This song spoofs its secular model, "The Rose That All Are Praising."<sup>13</sup>

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>The rose that all are praising<br/>is not the rose for me;<br/>Too many eyes are gazing<br/>upon that costly tree;<br/>But there's a rose in yonder glen<br/>The shuns the gaze of other men,<br/>For me its blossom raising —<br/>O! that's the rose for me,<br/>O! that's the rose for me,<br/>O! that's the rose for me,</p> | <p>The God that others worship<br/>is not the God for me;<br/>He has no parts nor body<br/>and cannot hear nor see;<br/>But I've a God that lives above<br/>A God of Power and of love,<br/>A God of revelation —<br/>O! that's the God for me,<br/>O! that's the God for me,<br/>O! that's the God for me,</p> |
|--|---|

A more elaborate parody is "The Mormon Jubilee," written on Joseph Smith's return from Springfield in January 1843. The first version was written by Wilson Law and Willard Richards to be sung to the tune of "There's Nae Luck About the House" or of "Auld Lang Syne."<sup>14</sup> Law and Richards's song adapts both of these earlier songs with a subtlety that may escape our modern ears. "There's Nae Luck" is an old Scottish song about the return of the "goodman" (the head of the household). Its tune is merry, of course, for as the refrain tells us, "there's little pleasure in the house when our goodman's awa."<sup>15</sup> The Scottish song and its Mormon variant call for the household to put away their chores and celebrate the goodman's return.

"Nae Luck"

And are ye sure the news is true?  
And are ye sure he's well?  
Is this a time to tawk of work?  
Make haste! Set by your wheel!

"Mormon Jubilee"

And are you sure the news is true?  
And are you sure he's free?  
Then let us join with one accord  
And have a jubilee!

After their first verse, Law and Richards append a simple chorus reminiscent of the jubilee choruses of frontier revivals as well as of a peculiar version of "Auld Lang Syne" known as "The Irish Jubilee."<sup>16</sup>

We'll have a jubilee, my friends,  
We'll have a jubilee,  
With heart and voice we'll all rejoice  
In that our Prophet's free.

<sup>13</sup> See Albert E. Wier, *The Book of a Thousand Songs* (New York: Muniel, 1918), pp. 400–401.

<sup>14</sup> *Wasps* 1 (14 Jan. 1843): [1].

<sup>15</sup> See James Johnson, *The Scots Musical Museum* (Hartboro, Penns.: Folklore Associates, 1962; a two-volume reprint of the 1853 four-volume edition), 1:44.

<sup>16</sup> For a jubilee chorus see "This is the Jubilee" in George Pullen Jackson, *Down-East Spirituals and Others* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1942), pp. 248–49. For "The Irish Jubilee" see Sigmund Spaeth, *Weep Some More, My Lady* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1927), pp. 225–28.



Law and Richards's song spends sixteen verses making fun of the civil authorities who had dragged Joseph to court. But Eliza Snow thought the matter should be dealt with more properly. A week after "The Mormon Jubilee" was published in its pages, *The Wasp* announced that Sister Eliza would be writing an adaptation of the adaptation, which would be published in a few weeks. Perhaps because it paints a more sedate portrait of the powers of the state and is more elegant and somber, it was quickly reprinted in the *Times and Seasons* (without any reference to the Law-Richards song) directly following a notice requesting that "hymns adapted to the worship of the Church" be sent to Emma Smith "immediately."<sup>17</sup>

The double murder of Joseph and Hyrum a year and a half later gave birth to a new pathos in Mormon poetry. Two hymn texts written by John Taylor became especially beloved and have remained in Mormon hymnbooks to this day. Both were modeled on secular songs.

"The Seer," written for the dedication of the Seventies Hall, adapted the Sigismund Neukomm song, "The Sea," which was a setting of a poem by the sentimental British poet Bryan Cullen Proctor better known as "Barry Cornwall."<sup>18</sup> Taylor's change of "sea" to "Seer" is unambiguous and naive adaptation. But, beside the parallelism of the first words, the two poems share many phrases, ideas, and images.

*Proctor*

The sea! the sea! the open sea!  
The blue, the fresh, the ever  
free!  
Without a mark, without a bound  
It runneth the earth's wide  
regions round;

. . .

I'm on the sea! I'm on the  
sea!  
I am where I would ever be.

. . .

I've lived since then in calm  
and strife  
Full fifty summers a sailor's  
life.

*Taylor*

The Seer, the Seer, Joseph the Seer.  
I'll sing of the Prophet ever  
dear.  
His equal now cannot be found  
By searching the wide world  
around.

. . .

He's free, he's free, the Prophet's  
free;  
He is where he will ever be.

. . .

Beyond the reach of mobs  
and strife,  
He rests unharmed in endless  
life.

Taylor's poem also contains general allusions to the sea itself.

'Mid the foaming billows of angry strife  
He stood at the helm of the ship of life.

<sup>17</sup> *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 Feb. 1843): 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Times and Seasons* 5 (1 Jan. 1845): 767. For the full text of "The Sea," see Barry Cornwall, *English Songs and Other Small Poems* (London: Edward Moxon, 1832), pp. 1-2.

(This appears to be a second reworking of Proctor's "sailor's life" lines.) The lifting and adaptation of key words and ideas here is quite as Phelps might have done. In fact, Phelps also borrowed the first line, the meter, and the tone of Proctor's poem for an 1845 verse called "The Sky." The first stanza gives some sense of that poem's unintentional mirth:

"The sky, the sky, the clear blue sky" —  
 O how I love to gaze upon it!  
 The upper deep of realms on high —  
 I wonder when the Lord begun it?<sup>19</sup>

Seven months after "The Seer," John Taylor published another poem in tribute to Joseph, "O Give Me Back My Prophet Dear," to be sung to the tune of "The Indian Student's Lament."<sup>20</sup> I have been unable to locate the tune of the "Lament." I can, however, tentatively identify it with a song known at Nauvoo which begins "O give me back my bended bow." This song was perhaps the basis of an 1842 poetic parody of atheism, published in *The Wasp*, beginning "O give me back my God again!"<sup>21</sup> Taylor's first line, of course, clearly echoes "O give me back my bended bow." I suspect that once the full text of "The Indian Student's Lament" is uncovered further parallels will be seen.

In most cases the first line of a borrowed text remains closest to its model and is the most transparent reference to the earlier work. From there on, lines are more freely composed with only occasional borrowings of wording or image. In W. W. Phelps's martyrdom hymn, titled simply "Joseph Smith" (now known as "Praise to the Man"), the adaptation is subtler than usual but perhaps more potent.<sup>22</sup> Phelps's hymn, published five weeks after Joseph's assassination, was to be sung to the tune of "Star in the East."<sup>23</sup> This was a Christ-

<sup>19</sup> *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 May 1845): 895. Phelps's predilection for the rhyme-at-any-cost line is evident from time to time as in this verse from the original version of "Now We'll Sing with One Accord": "The commandments to the Church/ which the saints will always search/ (where the joys of heaven perch . . ."

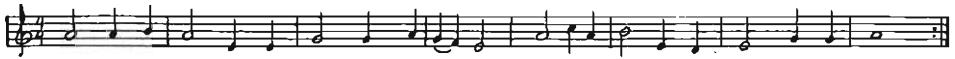
<sup>20</sup> *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 Aug. 1845): 991.

<sup>21</sup> *Wasp* 1 (31 Dec. 1842): [4]. See also *Nauvoo Neighbor* 3 (9 July 1845): [4] for a reference to the first line.

<sup>22</sup> There is a rumor in the Church, propagated by Nicholas G. Morgan, Sr., ed., *Eliza R. Snow, An Immortal* (Salt Lake City: Nicholas G. Morgan, Sr., 1957), that Eliza R. Snow actually wrote "Praise to the Man." The original publication, *Times and Seasons* 5 (1 Aug. 1844): 607, was anonymous but appeared below a section of "Poetry by Miss Eliza R. Snow." Aside from obvious stylistic differences between "Praise to the Man" and Eliza Snow's work, there is good evidence that Snow did not consider the poem hers. For example, in the LDS Primary organization's *Hymns and Songs* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1880), compiled and edited by Snow, the song is credited to Phelps. Maureen Urnsbach Beecher's dossier on this question is on file at the LDS Church Library, Salt Lake City.

<sup>23</sup> For the text and oldest tune of "Star in the East," see Jackson, *Down-East Spirituals*, p. 188. This is the tune as it appears in William Walker, comp., *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* (New Haven, Conn.: Nathan Whiting, 1835), p. 16. Of the several variants known as "Star in the East," this is the only one I can find that fits Phelps's verse-refrain structure. Coincidentally, it appears to be the one known among the Campbellites. See

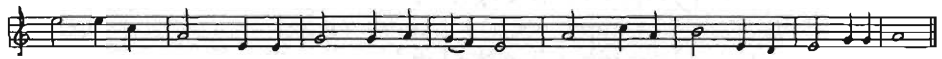




Praise to the man who communed with Jeho--vah, Jesus anointed "that Prophet and Seer,"  
Blessed to open the last dispensa---tion; Kings extol him and nations revere.  
shall



Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven, Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain,



Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren, Death cannot conquer the hero again.

W. W. Phelps's "Joseph Smith," to the tune of the oldest and best-known "Star in the East."

mas song, a hymn of praise to the Bethlehem star — the sign of Christ's first coming just as, to the Latter-day Saints, Joseph's death was a sign of Christ's imminent return. "Praise to the Man" describes and praises the Prophet; "Star in the East" glorifies the Christ child. In some versions of "Star" the chorus begins "Hail the blest morn." In "Praise" the chorus begins "Hail to the prophet." The use of "Star in the East" as the basis for a hymn to Joseph Smith may have elevated the Prophet in the minds of its hearers to a position close to the Savior and, in so doing, undoubtedly provoked and offended non-believers far more than Phelps's poetry itself. This adaptation may be seen as a subtle metaphor of John Taylor's declaration that "Joseph Smith . . . has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it" (D&C 135:2).

The City of Joseph, though, continued to flourish after the Prophet had ascended to heaven. And new poems reflected a radiant optimism. A major new hymn by Phelps, also written for the dedication of the Seventies Hall, adapted yet another secular song, "The Indian Hunter." The new song, entitled "A Voice from the Prophet: Come to Me,"<sup>24</sup> was in fact a reworking of an earlier and now better-known poem by Phelps called "Vade Mecum" or "Go with Me" — a preface to a versification of Joseph's account of the vision of degrees of glory.<sup>25</sup> The song Phelps had in mind was a mock-Indian lament, sung (in the first person) to the oppressive white man. The Indian narrator describes the love of his family, the beauties of the "far distant west" and of his "fair forest home," then pleads to be set free to go to them: each verse begins and ends with the words, "Let me go."<sup>26</sup> Phelps's adaptation for

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Alexander Campbell, comp., *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Bethany, Va.: A. Campbell, 1837), p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Nauvoo Neighbor* 2 (9 Jan. 1845): [1]; *Times and Seasons* 6 (15 Jan. 1845): 783.

<sup>25</sup> *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 Feb. 1843): 81–82. The first four verses of "Come to Me," except for the changes from "Go with" to "Come to," are identical to the four verses of "Vade Mecum"; four more verses were added to the later poem.

<sup>26</sup> The song is published in Gale Huntington, *Songs the Whalemens Sang* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1964), pp. 180–81. Huntington dates the song from 1844. Though there are other songs known as "The Indian Hunter," this is the only one that fits Phelps's meter, and is most certainly the one Aurelia Rogers recalled hearing at the Nauvoo Music

the Seventies Hall dedication turns the song into a plea by Joseph to “come to me . . . to the next better world . . . [to] the joys of a vast Paradise.” Each verse begins and ends with the words “come to me.” “The Indian Hunter” no doubt appealed to the Saints’ sympathy for the red man.<sup>27</sup> “Come to Me” capitalized on the song’s appeal and for a brief moment took its place in the Mormon sun — and on the poetry page of the *Times and Seasons*.

Poetic borrowing continued after the close of the Nauvoo period. John Taylor composed another variant of “The Rose that All Are Praising” which he called “The Upper California”: “Oh that’s the land for me!”<sup>28</sup> And in perhaps the most *Mormon* of all hymns, “Come, Come Ye Saints,” William Clayton borrowed not only the tune of the folk-hymn favorite “All Is Well” but also its inevitable refrain.<sup>29</sup> Clayton rather thoroughly rewrote the original text, a personal meditation on mortality, into a communal saga of privation, sickness, and death but kept the incantatory tag, “all is well.” The power of that “all is well” chant in Clayton’s verses is a derived power, a force he harnessed but did not generate. And, in the same way, the strength of many Mormon frontier hymns came from transforming popular culture, whether religious or secular, into something peculiar to the Saints.



Come, come, ye saints, no toil nor labor fear; But with joy wend your way.  
Though hard to you this journey may appear, Grace shall be as your day.



'Tis better far for us to strive our useless cares from us to drive



Do this and joy your hearts will swell-- All is well, all is well.

William Clayton’s “Come, Come Ye Saints,” to the earliest and best-known tune for “All Is Well.” Though quite similar to our present tune, it is more lilting and shows that the *second* word of each verse is the one to be emphasized, making it clear that the opening words are indeed the familiar expression of disappointment, “Come, *come*.” Note also that the middle line strongly resembles the corresponding line of our “Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief” — which, since it is a variant of the old tune “Duane Street” may have been influenced by “All Is Well.”

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Hall, probably in 1845. See her *Life Sketches of Orson Spencer and Others, and History of Primary Work* (Salt Lake City: Cannon & Sons, 1898), p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Compare one of Phelps’s best known lyrics, “O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man” in *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Dec. 1834): 34. “Red Man” was no doubt adapted from the Campbellite hymn “Come Tell Me Wand’ring Sinner.”

<sup>28</sup> Thomas E. Cheney, ed., *Mormon Songs from the Rocky Mountains: A Compilation of Mormon Folksongs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 68–69.

<sup>29</sup> For a study of “All Is Well,” see David W. Music, “A New Source for the Tune ‘All Is Well,’” *The Hymn* 29 (April 1978): 76–82.

The Mormon practice of borrowing tunes for new hymns, of course, was itself borrowed. The pages of Christian newspapers of the 1830s–40s are littered with new lyrics to be sung to established sacred and popular tunes. As at Mormon Nauvoo, each new religious public occasion seemed to call for the composition of a new song. Indeed the editor of *The Musical Magazine* complained in 1836 of the proliferation of such adapted sacred songs, noting that “extraneous circumstances are sometimes found . . . to give special interest to the well-meant doggerels, by which means they are brought into circulation and dignified with the name of poetry; after their interest ceases it is not always easy to cast them aside.”<sup>30</sup>

But if the Mormon practice was part of a more general practice, it had these distinguishing features: First, the creation of new hymns was not capricious but imperative as the Saints’ doctrine became more and more distinctive and, to the Christian world, heretical. Second, the Saints’ communal conception of their faith led them specifically to change sacred folk songs of private devotion into hymns of group worship. Third, their sense of themselves as a people preparing for the Second Coming led them to introduce into borrowed lyrics allusions to the parousia and the millennium. Fourth, their devotion to the Prophet Joseph Smith made him the subject of some of the finest adaptations; these hero songs became in themselves sacred songs and are still sung as hymns. Fifth, and most significantly, as the Saints’ religion permeated all their secular concerns, so their secular (or “temporal”) life became fused with their religion. Hence, they were less hesitant than the Protestants not only to mingle sacred lyrics with secular tunes but also to commit their holiest poetic thoughts to adaptations of secular words themselves. For as their Lord had told them, “all things unto me are spiritual” (D&C 29:34).

The bulk of poetic borrowing in early Mormonism may imply a lack of creative imagination in the Mormon mind, a simple dearth of originality. And so, in many cases, it may be. But more important, the practice shows the Saints’ acceptance of a contemporary Christian convention, reveals their social spirit and exuberant love for their Prophet, and suggests their sense of ease with popular culture. They changed the lyrics, it is true; but in using them as models for some of their most distinctive sacred songs, the Saints confessed their familiarity with them and affection for them. The poetic borrowing in early Mormonism may have been at its heart a saintly way of demonstrating how truth could spring from “the weak things of the earth” (D&C 124:1; 133:59).

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<sup>30</sup> “Numbers and Varieties of Hymns,” *The Musical Magazine* 2 (Oct. 1836): 172.