

40
Favorite
Hymns
*on the
Christian Life*

A CLOSER LOOK
AT THEIR SPIRITUAL
AND POETIC MEANING



LELAND RYKEN

Have you ever thoughtlessly sung a hymn, carried along by the familiar tune and well-known words, but disengaged in your heart and mind? In this intriguing volume, Leland Ryken is about to rescue you from such mindless, if melodic, repetition. By analyzing the poetry of forty well-known and beloved hymns, the author offers insight into these compositions as verse, enabling readers to appreciate the form and style of each piece. He also highlights the theology of each poem and links it to Scripture, providing ample material for meditation and prayer as well as inspiration for robust and thoughtful singing!

—**Rhett P. Dodson**, Senior Minister, Grace Presbyterian Church, Hudson, Ohio

A foundation of powerful and beautiful hymns is essential in the development of a community of believers and the expression of God's goodness through their lives. Thank you, Dr. Ryken, for this resource to the church.

—**Keith Getty**, Award-Winning Hymnwriter, Musician

What a great idea for a book! Professor Ryken helps hymn lovers to slow down and savor the words of such classic hymns as "Holy, Holy, Holy," "Amazing Grace," and "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." While providing fascinating historical and authorial background, Ryken draws us into the special poetic language and metaphors that have made each hymn so beloved, memorable, and life-changing.

—**Louis Markos**, Professor in English and Scholar in Residence, Houston Baptist University; Author, *Literature: A Student's Guide* and *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkein and Lewis*

This fine little book will serve as a salutary antidote to the thinning content of much of what passes for worship music today. Contemporary Christian music is in desperate need of theological depth.

Leland Ryken brings all of his poetic experience as a master teacher to bear on this critical subject. His poetic sensibilities have enabled him to make impeccable choices. I highly recommend this book as an aid to worship, an instruction in the value of poetry, and a vital voice in the contemporary conversation about worship music.

—**Gregory Reynolds**, Editor, the *Ordained Servant Journal*;
Pastor Emeritus; Author

The “lyric” of a song is a lyric *poem*. Sometimes the music draws all our attention, so that we skim over the words and what they mean. This is certainly true of hymns. Their lyrics are devotional poems of the highest order, and reading them closely can be a spiritual experience. Leland Ryken takes the texts of forty classic hymns and gives us just the help we need to understand their meaning and appreciate their greatness. In doing so, he helps Christians to realize why these time-honored hymns are such treasures.

—**Gene Edward Veith**, Professor of Literature Emeritus, Patrick Henry College

If you are seeking God’s will for your life and are faced with obstacles, if you are a student of poetry and desire fresh insights into literary devices, if you are a song writer like I am and you need some excellent worship texts, this short collection of hymn poems will strengthen your faith *and* your craft. I have read these poems and meditations for my daily devotions, and every day I found fresh insights from Watts, Cowper, or Francis Havergal. Though we usually sing these verses with fellow worshipers, they are rich food for contemplation.

—**James Ward**, Recording Artist, Singer-Songwriter

In his fascinating study of poetry as praise, Leland Ryken breathes life into the old hymns and, by doing so, reminds us how to sing to the Lord a new song.

—**Carolyn Weber**, Award-winning Author; Professor, University of Western Ontario, and Heritage College and Seminary

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For Nancy and Jeremy

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Introduction

IT will doubtless surprise most readers to learn that until 1870, the customary format of a hymnal was a small (five-by-three-inch) book consisting of words only. The most accurate designation for such a book is an “anthology of devotional poems.” These anthologies were carried back and forth between home and office and school and church. *Forty Favorite Hymns on the Christian Life* seeks to revive this tradition of experiencing familiar hymns as poems.

Among several good reasons for such a revival is the fact that every hymn is a poem first, and only later becomes a hymn. As a verbal text, a hymn possesses all the qualities of a poem. Only when it is paired with music does it become a hymn. Much is gained by the singing of hymns accompanied by music, but much is also lost.

This anthology of hymnic poems aims to restore what has been lost. An immediate gain comes from reading the successive stanzas in linear fashion, with one stanza following its predecessor. Our gaze keeps moving forward instead of returning to the same starting point at the beginning of each stanza. The result is a clear sense of the sequential progression of thought and feeling, as it grows organically from beginning to end.

A second advantage of reading a hymn as a poem is that we can read slowly instead of being hurried along by the music and singing. Poetry is concentrated, and it accordingly requires

pondering and analyzing. When reading a poem, we can take as long as the text requires. Such contemplative reading allows us to pause on individual images, letting the literal picture register in our imagination and then noting the connotations and emotions that flow from each image. Figures of speech such as metaphors and similes likewise ask to have their meanings unpacked.

Much of the beauty that we experience when we sing hymns is the beauty of the music. Experiencing hymns as poems puts the focus on the verbal beauty of the words and phrases. The great hymns of Christian tradition are an untapped source of devotional poetry, just waiting to be made available for the pleasure and edification of Christians.

It is not an overstatement to claim that this anthology of hymns presented and analyzed as devotional poems will introduce readers to the hymns they never knew. Readers will realize that they have been deprived of a treasure that was never opened to them.

Every entry in this anthology consists of three elements—a hymnic poem, an explication of the poem, and a passage from the Bible that ties into the hymn and its explication. The Bible passages are intended to enhance the reading of this book for devotional purposes.

THE explications of the poems should be used as a lens through which to look closely at the accompanying texts. They are not a substitute for the poems, nor are they detachable pieces of information. They function as a travel guide at a site, interpreting what the travelers are looking at and bringing out features that would otherwise be missed. There is no prescribed order for reading a poem and its accompanying explication, but regardless of whether you read the poem or the explication first, the explication is designed to send you back to the text

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repeatedly. For example, every explication includes an account of the flow of the successive stanzas or sections of the poem under consideration and examines how different rhetorical and literary techniques are used in each one. Thus, if the explication says something about image patterns or allusions, that insight comes to fruition only if you go back to the text and see how the statement in the explication is true. This book will achieve its intended purpose only if you go back and forth between a poem and its accompanying explication.

A glossary at the back of the book gives definitions for the poetic and literary terms that will be used in the discussions of the different poems.



Holy, Holy, Holy

Reginald Heber (1783–1826)

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,
Who wert and art and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee,
Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see,
Only thou art holy; there is none beside thee,
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name, in earth and sky and sea.
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

THE importance of this hymn, which was first published in 1826, is suggested by the fact it belongs to a very elite

circle of hymns that are included in nearly every English-language hymnbook. It was well regarded in its own day, as well—the Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson is well attested to have admired this hymn in particular.

The high style of the poem is its most obvious formal quality. Among the features of this high style are exalted epithets for God and the piling up of adjectives, nouns, and verbs in patterns of two and three, creating an effect of irrepressible energy. An example is “perfect in power, in love, and purity.” The dominant tone is exaltation. This exuberance is enhanced by the length of the lines, which are nearly twice as long as what we find in most hymns. Despite this grandeur, there is a single rhyming sound (the long *e*) for the entire poem.

Multiple genres converge in this exalted poem. Despite its brevity, the poem can be called an *ode*, which handbooks define as an exalted poem on a dignified subject written in the high style. Most odes praise their subject, and this poem fits the pattern, thereby also qualifying as a psalm of praise. Because the speaker in the poem addresses God directly, the poem is also a prayer. And since the opening line is an English translation of a line from ancient church liturgy, the adjective *liturgical* is an accurate one to attach to the poem. In this vein, we might note that Reginald Heber, an Anglican clergyman, composed the hymn for Trinity Sunday.

Because of the conspicuous repetition of the word *holy*, it would be easy to conclude that God’s holiness is the theme of the poem, but that would be misleading. The ascription of holiness to God is part of the more general theme of the worthiness of God’s character. Other aspects of God’s worthiness are also praised. Under the unifying umbrella of God’s worthiness of praise, the poet constructs a mosaic of specific variations on the central theme: God’s holiness, God’s existence as a Trinity, the attributes of God (with mercy, might, glory, power, love,

Holy, Holy, Holy

and purity all mentioned), the universality with which God is extolled (by people in stanza 1, by saints and angels in stanza 2, and by the creatures of nature in stanza 4). Stanza 3 is a kind of “aside” in which the poet pauses to note that human sinfulness has a way of obscuring people’s ability to perceive God’s glory.

The triumph of this poem is that it sweeps us up and makes us participants in the very praise that, according to the poem, the universe is already ascribing to God on earth and in heaven.

IT is nearly certain that the poet composed this exalted hymn of praise with Revelation 4:8, 10–11 serving as his model:

The four living creatures . . . never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty . . . !”

. . . The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

“Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power.”