

Reflections on ‘Of the Father’s Heart Begotten’

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“Of the Father’s Heart Begotten” is a magnificent hymn which memorably captures the eternal nature of the Son of God. With clarity and beauty, it expresses both the deity and humanity of Christ. In expounding the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, it offers historical continuity with our present-day church that is worthy of reflection.

This season of Advent brings the end times into focus and asks us what it means to live with hope in the “between times”. By setting out the order of salvation, anticipating “the mystic close” and presenting the central act of the Incarnation as originating from above, this hymn provides an answer to that question: it does so using the apocalyptic language of the Book of Revelation 1:8: the alpha and the omega. As T.S. Eliot puts it in his poem *Little Gidding*, ‘What we call the beginning is often the end/And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.’ This is a hymn for all seasons, but especially Advent and Christmas.

The verses *Ancient & Modern* printed above originate in a fourth-century liturgical hymn by the Christian poet Prudentius (c.348–413 BC), entitled ‘A hymn for every hour’. It was part of a daily hymn book consisting of 12 sacred poems for private use.¹ The hymn was first translated into English in the mid-nineteenth century by John Mason Neale (1818–66), which reflected his personal enthusiasm for the authors of Christian antiquity with their grasp of eternal truths. A second translation was made by Henry W. Baker (1821–77) and was inserted in the original 1861 edition of *Hymns Ancient & Modern*.

The tune DIVINUM MYSTERIUM, originating from an ancient plainchant melody, was first printed in 1582, in *Piae Cantiones*. It is aptly chosen for this hymn, which invites us to contemplate the divine mystery. A later version of this tune appeared in the Episcopal Hymnal of 1916 as a chant in triple-time. Nowadays, the pulse is one-in-a-bar, which seems to suit the Trinitarian character of the hymn, 3 in 1 and 1 in 3. Its dance-like feel lends a forward sense of movement into eternity – evermore and evermore! It is interesting to note that the refrain after each stanza is not, as such, in the original, but was inserted from the last line of the whole poem, *Omnibus te concelebrant saeculorum saeculis*. This is one example of how each generation has shaped the hymn before passing it on to the next one. The longevity of the hymn is also explained by its classic formulation of the Trinity.

The first verse situates the Incarnation within the whole sweep of history, tracing it from its source to the end times, using the paired imagery of the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, Fountain and Close. The mysterious identity of the Godhead, creative source of the word made flesh, encompasses the whole of time and yet is beyond time. The repetition of ‘He’ (rendering the demonstrative pronoun ‘ipse’ in the original Latin), intensifies the mysterious identification of the Word with Christ, who is not yet named. It serves to emphasise the source of his divinity, ‘from the Father’s heart’.

¹ See the articles ‘Corde natus ex Parentis’ and PRUDENTIUS, Aurelius Clemens (JRW). For the Latin text and notes, see A.S. Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns* (Cambridge at the University Press, 1922), pp.123-126.

In the words of the Nicene Creed, Christ is one with the Father, “begotten not made/created”. This conceptual distinction is clarified in the following verse, which states that ‘He *created* the threefold earth, sky and ocean’ (Exodus 20:11; Ps.146:6) – that is, apart from him. This looks like an attempt by its author, Prudentius, to engage with questions of doctrine surrounding the nature of God, which were addressed formally at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in 325 and 381 respectively.² The author affirms the co-equality of the divine Son with the Father and Holy Ghost, duly affirming the supernatural conception and agency of the Holy Ghost in Luke’s account (1:35) of the virgin birth.

The stepwise and memorable tune makes it an excellent choice for singers of all ages, not least young choristers.³ Perhaps the up-and-down movement of the melody mirrors the supernatural operation of the Christ-event? Or a trinitarian interpretation might see it as the interweaving of Father, Son and Holy Ghost in an internal circle of love.

I include a performance by the choir of Ely Cathedral of the familiar choral arrangement by Sir David Willcocks. I close with a prayer of Eric Milner-White, who initiated the annual Service of Nine Lessons and Carols in 1928 as Dean of Kings College, Cambridge.

Thou, O God, art the first and the last,
our beginning, our end.
As thou dost love and uphold us,
stir up thy children with the sure grasp of faith
to take hold of thee.

(Eric Milner-White, *My God, My Glory*, SPCK, London, 1954, p.113)

Amen

[Of The Father's Heart Begotten \(Sir David Willcocks\)](#) [Sung by Ely Cathedral Choir](#)

² See the reflection by Matthew Sikes, <https://medium.com/congregational-song/hymn-analysis-of-the-fathers-love-begotten-c702fb643ffb>

³ Vincent A. Lenti, “Of the Father's Love Begotten”: a hymn by Aurelius Clemens Prudentius’, *The Hymn* 60/3 (Summer 2009), pp. 7-15.