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Medieval Texts In Mormon Hymnody

Paul B. Pixton

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Three months after the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith received a revelation that directed the Prophet's wife, Emma, to make a selection of sacred hymns for the Church (D&C 25:12). The current edition of our hymnbook contains some 341 such hymns, including some that were in the original edition. Many others have been added over the past 150 years. In the preface of our hymnbook we read, "Inspirational music is an essential part of our meetings. The hymns invite the Spirit of the Lord, create a feeling of reverence, unify us as members, and provide a way for us to offer praises to the Lord."^[1] Some of these hymns are expressions of a clearly Latter-day Saint theology, such as "The Morning Breaks," "The Spirit of God," "Praise to the Man," "O My Father," and "High on the Mountain Top," while others, such as "Lead, Kindly Light" and "Abide with Me; 'Tis Eventide," have a more general message and have come to us from the greater Christian community.

Three hymns have, remarkably, come down to us from medieval authors, the earliest of whom flourished in the late eighth century and the latest in the early thirteenth century. A study of these hymns demonstrates some of the subtle changes in medieval Roman Catholic theology while at the same time drawing attention to three individuals who sought to give expression to their deepest spiritual feelings during a time of (as so many believe) limited enlightenment. I have undertaken this study for deep personal reasons, because I am by training a medieval historian who has spent more than forty-five years trying to understand and interpret a thousand-year period that generally receives short shrift in Latter-day Saint discussions: Is this not the period of the Great Apostasy? All too often in our treatment of human history we spring over the medieval centuries in our haste to get from the apostolic period to the age of the Reformation and the so-called forerunners of the Restoration. Indicative of this mindset was a discussion in a meeting of the high priests group in my home ward last year. There we talked about the outpouring of the Holy Ghost upon the earth at various times, and while the group found it easy to believe that such occurred during the Renaissance and Reformation periods, I was alone in proposing that there is ample evidence (for those willing to seek it) of such during the Middle Ages as well.

At a First Presidency Christmas devotional following the coming down of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Bloc, President Gordon B. Hinckley declared that the Spirit of the Lord has been brooding over the earth, including the people of eastern Europe.^[2] This marvelous metaphor is also useful in helping us appreciate long historical processes which were going on during the Middle Ages, without which the institutions and conditions which made possible the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ would not have existed in 1820. I invite you to come with me into a world not often entered by Church members, but a world of fascinating people, exciting ideas, enchanting places, and critically important institutions.

Our first stop will be in the world of the late eighth century; the place is northern Spain. Most of Spain had been overrun by Muslims in 711, and the remaining Christian powers were crowded up against the southern edge of the Pyrenees mountains in the kingdom of the Asturias. Centuries earlier, barbarian Germans known as the Visigoths had migrated from the area of the Black Sea all the way into Spain, where they settled among and in time merged with the Romanized Iberians. Among these hard-pressed Christians lived a man named Theodulf, who somehow managed to acquire a reputation for learning and a familiarity with both Christian and pagan writers. In the year 781, following a military expedition into Spain by the mighty Frankish king Charlemagne, Theodulf fled into Frankish-held territory and offered his services to the Carolingian court, where he quickly gained a reputation as an authority on theological

matters. For example, in 787 he was asked to draft a rebuttal to certain decrees recently issued by the Second Council of Nicea regarding the use of images in worship; the result was the theological compendium later known as the *Libri carolini* (“The Books by Charles”). While at the court, Theodulf became part of a small circle of scholars whose collective efforts generated that remarkable cultural flowering we call “the Carolingian Renaissance.”^[3]

Theodulf was a man of many talents. About 785 he was consecrated bishop of Orleans, and he later served as abbot of Fleury, demonstrating in the process qualities of an able administrator. But he was also a poet, a patron of art, and an architect—his oratory at St. Germigny-des-Près is still standing, showing a familiarity with churches from the east as well as from Visigothic Spain.

Following Charlemagne’s death in 814, Theodulf enjoyed good terms with the new king, Louis the Pious, but about 818 he fell from favor and was imprisoned at Angers. During his confinement he composed several poems, perhaps including one which contains the well-known lines *Gloria laus et honor*, which came to be included in the Palm Sunday processional music of the Catholic Church.^[4]

The text by Theodulf^[5] has been set to music composed by Melchior Teschner (1584–1635), as found in the Latter-day Saint hymnbook (no. 69). The translation used in the hymnal, the most widely known in English, reads:

*All glory, laud, and honor
To thee, Redeemer, King,
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.*

*Thou art the King of Israel,
Thou Davids royal Son,
Who in the Lord’s name comest,
The King and Blessed One.*

*The company of angels
Are praising thee on high,
And mortal men and all things
Created make reply.*

*The people of the Hebrews
With palms before thee went;
Our praise and love and anthems
Before thee we present.*

*To thee, before thy passion,
They sang their hymns of praise;
To thee, now high exalted,
Our melody we raise.*

*Thou didst accept their praises;
Accept the love we bring,
Who in all good delightest,
Thou good and gracious King.*

Another stanza is not included in our hymnal. Sung until the seventeenth century, its omission suggests how tastes have changed since that time:

*Be Thou, O Lord, the Rider,
And we the little ass;
That to God's holy city
Together we may pass.* ^[6]

It is significant that in articulating the fundamental doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the Prophet Joseph Smith placed the concept of the Godhead first, followed immediately by the concepts of the Fall and the Atonement. It is also noteworthy that so much of the understanding of these teachings rests on latter-day revelation and that a good portion of each temple session is devoted to a review of them. Clearly, these were truths lost to some degree over the course of the seventeen centuries between the apostolic Church and the Restoration. But it is possible to catch a glimpse of that change as we consider the text of Theodulf's poem; therein we see reflected the social setting of his day. Human institutions later labeled as *feudalism* were in the process of being formed, giving structure to a dangerous and uncertain world. Weaker men voluntarily submitted to the power and authority of stronger men, binding themselves by oaths to serve and obey. The rights and obligations of both the overlord and the subordinate were clearly defined, and breaking this bond was a serious matter.

The prevailing theology in the late eighth to early ninth century is summarized most effectively by Professor Richard W. Southern, who describes the view of theologians before the end of the eleventh century:

They argued that by sin—"disobedience to God and obedience to the will of the Devil—man had voluntarily withdrawn himself from the service of God and committed himself to the service of the Devil. It was rather like the act of *diffidatio* in feudal custom by which a man rejected the authority of his overlord and submitted himself to another. Of course, the overlord did not acquiesce in this state of affairs: it meant war—but still, the rules of *diffidatio* having been observed, the war must be fought according to the rules. So it was in the war between God and the Devil over the soul of Man. God could not fairly use his omnipotence to deprive the Devil of the rights he had acquired over Man by Man's consent: the rule of justice must be observed even in fighting the Devil. The command over Man which the Devil had acquired by voluntary cession, could only be lost in one of two ways: either Man could go back on his choice and voluntarily turn again to God; or the Devil could himself forfeit his claim by abusing his power and breaking the rules by which he held mankind in fee. But Man's tragedy consisted precisely in the impossibility of a voluntary return. The only hope for Man therefore lay in some breach of the rules by the Devil himself."^[7]

Man in this drama has a very static role: he is a helpless spectator in a battle between God and Satan, ultimately won by God because He was a superior strategist—He took on flesh and overcame the devil's power. That God should become man was a great mystery to these early Christians, a majestic, awe-inspiring act which Theodulf acclaims in his poem—this is a victory expression, with little or no place for tender compassion for the sufferings of Jesus. The earthly incidents of Jesus' life were swallowed up in a drama enacted between heaven and hell.

Between the death of Theodulf of Orleans in 821 and the early twelfth century, subtle changes occurred in people's social, intellectual, and theological perceptions. No one epitomizes these changes more than Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), a young nobleman from southern France who eschewed the life of the world and in 1113 entered the recently established monastery of Citeaux in Burgundy. Three years later he was directed by the abbot to establish a "daughter-house" on the lands of the count of Troyes in the austere solitude of *Clara vallis*—Clairvaux. At the time of his death he was the dominant personality in all of Latin Christendom (that is, the Roman Catholic Church). He counseled popes and chastised secular rulers; inspired the founding of the Knights Templars; preached a crusade with his unusual oratorical skills; and wrote several hundred sermons, over five hundred letters dealing with a wide range of issues, and numerous treatises on theology and liturgy. Through these writings he had a profound influence on the development of religious sensitivity and practices, not only in his own day but from that time forward.^[8]

Religious life as expressed in monasticism had become extremely busy in the centuries since Theodulf.

Originally conceived of as providing balance between physical and spiritual activities, it had been transformed in the tenth to eleventh centuries into an intense routine that left the individual little private time for contemplation. In the late eleventh century, however, a trend toward a greater measure of solitude, of introspection and self-knowledge, grew rapidly and found expression in numerous spiritual soliloquies. This same period also saw the birth of a new interest in the human Jesus, a new devotion to Him, and a new concern with all the circumstances of His life. This cult of the human Jesus was closely linked in its origin to the desire to see His earthly home in Palestine (a pilgrimage) and to the crusading ideals. Jesus came to be viewed more and more as a human being, not by the exclusion of His divine nature but by the restoration of a balance strangely lacking in the notions of earlier centuries.

Borrowing from the eloquent declarations of Anselm of Canterbury of the previous generation, St. Bernard and his fellow Cistercians popularized this new view of Christ, one that engendered compassion and tenderness rather than the fear and trembling of Theodulf's age. And it was this image of Christ that passed on into later centuries and is clearly familiar to Latter-day Saints.

Whether rightly attributed to Bernard or not, one of the most popular and successful expressions of this new piety was contained in a long poem, "*Dulcis Jesu memoria*," which has been made familiar in the translation by J. M. Neale:

Jesu! the very thought is sweet; In that dear Name all heart-joys meet: But, oh, than honey sweeter far The glimpses of His presence are. ^[9]

In the Latter-day Saint hymnbook (no. 141), this becomes—

Jesus, the very thought of thee, With sweetness fills my breast. But sweeter far thy face to see, And in thy presence rest.

The poetic writings of St. Bernard and other Cistercians paralleled artistic representations of the Crucifixion that began to appear in the late eleventh century. From the time of Theodulf and beyond, the traditional way of representation conveyed a sense of a majestic and remote act of divine power, but from the time of Anselm and Bernard it began to explore the limits of human suffering: The dying figure was stripped of its garments, the arms sagged with the weight of the body, the head hung down to one side, the eyes were closed, the blood ran down the cross. This new emotionalism led to the countless pieces of art depicting the suffering Christ, whether it be the extremes of Matthias Grunewald's painting or the tenderness of Michelangelo's. ^[10]

Born nearly a century after Bernard, Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) grew up in the rapidly changing world of northern Italy in the last quarter of the twelfth century. Unlike the aristocratic Bernard, Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant and spent his youth reading chivalric romances and dreaming of being another Lancelot. In 1205, while engaged in military activities, Francis experienced the first stages of an agonizing spiritual "conversion"; that is, he became aware of the glaring discrepancies between the New Testament descriptions of how Christ and His disciples lived and the affluent display of contemporary clergy. In consequence thereof he renounced his secure but dull life and dedicated himself to complete poverty and service to the poor and needy.

Francis became a legend in his own time, eventually drawing hundreds into his association, which won papal approval as the Order of Lesser Brothers (*Ordo Fratrum Minorum*) in 1210. He was a charismatic preacher about whom stories sprang up. Among these are some about his communicating with birds, fish, wolves, and other animals. Thomas of Celano (d. 1260), in his *First Life of St. Francis (Vita prima sancti Francisci)*, preserves this anecdote: "During the time [after 1210] when . . . many joined themselves to the brethren, the most blessed father Francis was journeying through the valley of Spoleto and came to a spot near Bevagna [and three miles south of Assisi] where a very great number of birds of different sorts were gathered together, namely doves, rooks, and those other birds that are called in the vulgar tongue *monade* [jackdaws]. When he saw them, being a man of the most fervent temper and also very tender and affectionate toward all the lower and irrational creatures, Francis, the most blessed servant of God, left his companions in the way and ran eagerly toward the birds. When he was come close to them and saw that they were awaiting him, he gave them his accustomed greeting. But, not a little surprised that the birds did not fly away (as they

are wont to do), he was filled with exceeding joy and humbly begged them to hear the word of God.

“After saying many things to them, he concluded: ‘My brother birds, much ought you to praise your Creator and ever to love him who has given you feathers for clothing, wings for flight, and all that you had need of. God has made you noble among his creatures, he has given you a habitation in the purity of the air, and, whereas you neither sow nor reap, he himself does still protect and govern you without any care of your own.’”^[11]

A similar theme is found in the “Canticle of Brother Sun,” a hymn of praise honoring all creatures, which Francis wrote in Italian in 1225, shortly before his death.^[12] We show this in a translation much closer to the original in the left-hand column, while the translation by William H. Draper, found in the Latter-day Saint hymnal as “All Creatures of Our God and King” (no. 62), is in the right-hand column.

*Most High Almighty Good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor,
and all blessings!
To you alone, Most High, do they belong,
And no man is worthy to mention You.
Be praised, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
Especially Sir Brother Sun,
By whom You give us the light of day!
And he is beautiful and radiant with great
splendor.*

*Of you, Most High, he is a symbol!
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the
Stars!*

*In the sky You formed them bright and lovely
and fair.*

*Be praised, My Lord, for Brother Wind
And for the Air and cloudy and clear and all
Weather,
By which You give sustenance to Your
creatures!*

*Be praised, My Lord, for Sister Water,
Who is very useful and humble and lovely
and chaste!*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,
By whom You give us light at night,
And he is beautiful and merry and mighty and
strong!*

*Be praised, My Lord, for our Sister Mother
Earth,*

*Who sustains and governs us,
And produces fruits with colorful flowers and
leaves!*

*All creatures of our God and King,
Lift up your voice and with us sing,*

Alleluia! Alleluia!

*Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Thou silver moon with softer gleam,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Oh, praise him! Alleluia!*

*Thou rushing wind that art so strong,
Ye clouds that sail in heav'n along,*

Alleluia! Alleluia!

*Thou rising morn, in praise rejoice;
Ye light of evening, find a voice,
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*Alleluia! Oh, praise him! Alleluia!
Thou flowing water, pure and clear,
Make music for thy Lord to hear, Alleluia!
Alleluia!*

*Thou fire so masterful and bright,
That gives to man both warmth and light,*

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Alleluia! Oh, praise him! Alleluia!

Dear Mother Earth, who day by day

*Unfoldest blessings on our way,
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*The flow 'rs and fruit that in thee grow,
Let them his glory also show,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Oh, praise him! Alleluia!*

*Be praised, my Lord, for those who forgive for
love of You*

[13]

And endure infirmities and tribulations.

Francis's love for nature and God's creatures was never an end in itself. Because all creatures reflect the glory of the Creator, his focus on them was intended to ultimately draw human attention to God. Francis saw inanimate nature at the service of man, man striving to live in peace with man, and death as the point where time meets

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eternity. Whereas earlier ascetics had renounced the world, including the dualistic Cathars (Albigensians), who in the twelfth century had rejected the physical creation as the work of Satan, Francis reflects changes in perceptions as Christians of his generation were learning to cope with materialism; rather than rejecting the physical creation as something evil that was to be shunned, Francis embraced that world and through it praised the Creator of the earth and all that is in it.

The restored gospel of Jesus Christ also testifies that this earth was created by a loving Father through His Son, for a specific purpose (1 Nephi 17:36)—not as a place to punish His children for disobedience but as a testing ground. Once the earth has “answer[ed] the end of its creation” (D&C 49:16), it will “be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory” (Articles of Faith 1:10). With St. Francis we take delight in the Creation and sing praises to our Father for our place within it.

Our brief journey through five medieval centuries has come to an end. What we have witnessed is a religious world constantly redefining itself, breaking loose from many of the older views that had charted its course from late antiquity through the end of the first millennium of the Common Era. What we have discovered is both individuals and groups whose search for God found religious expression in poetry that has transcended their time and place, has enriched our lives, and has become an integral part of the Latter-day Saints' acceptance of “anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (Articles of Faith 1:13).

[1] *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), ix.

[2] See Gordon B. Hinckley, First Presidency Christmas devotional, December 1989, 4–5.

York: Macmillan, 1951); Richard E. Sullivan, *Aix-la Chapelle in the Age of Charlemagne* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); and Pierre Riche, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 327, 332, 342–13, 348–49.

[3] For detailed insights into the Carolingian Renaissance, see M. L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, A.D. 500 to 900*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957); Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne: His World and His Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1951); Richard E. Sullivan, *Aix-la Chapelle in the Age of Charlemagne* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); and Pierre Riche, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 327, 332, 342–13, 348–49.

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See William Smith and Henry Wace, eds., *A Dictionary of Christian Biography* (London: John Murray, 1887), 4:983–89. E. L. Dummler, *Poetae latini aevi Carolini* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1981), 1:558, gives the full text 78 lines, based on the Paris MS 18557 (tenth century). See also J. Kayser, *Beitrage zur Geschichte und Erklarung der alien Kirchenhymnen* (Paderborn: F. Schoningh, 1886), 2:313–22; Albert Hauck, ed., *Realencyklopedie fur protestantische Theologie und Kirche* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichssche Buchhandlung, 1907), 19:622–25.

[5] Scriptural inspiration for the hymn is found in Psalms 24:7–10; 118:25–26; Matthew 21:1–17; Luke 19:37–38.

[6] See John Julian, ed., *A Dictionary of Hymnology, Setting Forth the Origin and History of Christian Hymns of All Ages and Nations*, 2d ed. rev. (New York: Dover, 1957), 426.

[7] Richard W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953), 234–35.

[8] See Robert S. Hoyt, *Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2d ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 345–47. On the life of St. Bernard, see also Watkin Williams, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935), especially 372–73. Useful in the understanding of Bernard's thought are G. R. Evans, *The Mind of St. Bernard of Clairvaux* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), and Bernard of Clairvaux (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), by the same author.

[9] The poem exists in numerous manuscripts from the late twelfth century and is attributed by many to an anonymous English Cistercian, rather than to Bernard himself. The entire poem has been edited by Andre Wilmart, *Le Jubilus' dit de Saint Bernard* (Rome: n.p., 1944); see Southern, *Making of the Middle Ages*, 233–34.

[10] See Southern, *Making of the Middle Ages*, 236–38.

[11] Thomas of Celano, cited in A. G. Howell, trans., *The Lives of St. Francis of Assisi, by Brother Thomas of Celano* (New York: n.p., 1908), 57–59. Originally published as Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima sancti Francisci* 1.16.42–43, ed. E. d'Alencon (Rome: n.p., 1906).

[12] See Marion A. Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 3d ed. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973); see also Edward A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic, the Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

[13] William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 309–10, quoting Raphael Brown, trans., *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), 317–18.

[14] See Vincent Moleta, *From St. Francis to Giotto: The Influence of St. Francis on Early Italian Art and Literature* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 5–10.