

**LATIN HYMNS IN ENGLISH
VERSE, WITH SHORT
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES
OF THEIR AUTHORS**

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Latin hymns in English verse, with short biographical sketches of their authors by James H. Van Buren

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JAMES H. VAN BUREN

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Latin Hymns in English Verse

*WITH SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES
OF THEIR AUTHORS*

BY THE
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INTRODUCTION BY
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TO
My Beloved Wife and Son
THESE
STUDIES IN THE ANCIENT HYMNODY
OF THE CHURCH
ARE
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

INTRODUCTION

ONE of the first fruits of the Spirit is joy, and joy is naturally expressed in song. James (v. 13) says, "Is any merry? let him sing psalms." Paul (Eph. v. 19) urges Christians to sing and make melody in their hearts to the Lord, and exhorts them (Eph. v. 19, Col. iii. 16) to help one another when they come together for worship, by "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." At midnight, in prison, Paul and Silas "were praying and singing hymns unto God" (Acts xvi. 25). The worship of the church from the beginning included the singing both of psalms used in the Jewish ritual and also of hymns that were peculiar to the Christian service.

Besides the four great anthems given by Luke, the *Magnificat* (i. 46-55), the *Benedictus* (i. 68-79), the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (ii. 14), and the *Nunc Dimittis* (ii. 29-32), there are passages in the New Testament that may be fragments of early hymns; e. g., Eph. v. 14, 1 Tim. iii. 16, vi. 15, 16, and several in the Apocalypse. It is probable that there was a considerable body of these early hymns, though but few of them have come down to us in any form. In the early part of the second century, the younger Pliny, who was governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan, to give him whatever information he had obtained about the Christians in his province and to ask his advice about their treatment. In describing their meetings (Ep. x. 96) he says, on the evidence of those who admitted that they belonged to the sect, that the Chris-

tians " were accustomed to come together on a certain day [of the week] before daylight, and sing a hymn to Christ as God." As this is the only part of the service that is mentioned, it is evident that the singing of hymns held a very important place in Christian worship within a century after the death of Christ.

But the Jewish psalms in Hebrew and the Christian hymns in Greek did not wholly satisfy the needs of the Western Church. When the Christians of Rome began to express their emotions in Latin hymns, they soon broke away from the restrictions that had been imposed upon classical Latin poetry by Greek influence. Quantity was more and more disregarded, and accent took its place. This was a necessary change. The lyric verse forms of Horace and Catullus were too artificial and too difficult to be appreciated by the classes in society to which the majority of the Christian converts belonged. Simplicity of form, as well as simplicity of thought, was necessary when the uneducated common people made up mainly the congregation that joined in singing the hymns. The earliest meter in common use was iambic dimeter, arranged in stanzas of four verses each, as in our long-meter tunes. This was the prevailing form in the third and fourth centuries.

The introduction of accent into Latin poetry was gradually followed by the use of rhyme, to mark the end of the verse. In the Ambrosian hymns it is found rarely. Evidently it was not carefully avoided, as in the classical poetry of Rome, nor carefully sought, as in the hymns of the Middle Ages. When it appears, it is for the most part imperfect, and employed irregularly, as in *Aurora lucis rutilat* (p. 44). In two hymns that are assigned to this period, Hilary's hymn on the