

“How Great Thou Art!”:

An Athanasian Masterpiece

The history of a beautiful hymn



This hymn is a masterpiece because it is so deeply Athanasian—like St. Athanasius in his treatise on the Incarnation, it praises the Savior of the world and, at the same time, the Word through whom the world came to be. Thus, it unifies Creation and Redemption, Christian discipleship and love of nature, so crucially important in a society in which a widespread loss of faith corresponds to a loss of the meaning of nature...

The hymn’s lyrics derive from an 1885 poem by a lay minister, Carl Boberg, inspired by what he saw walking home from a worship service, along the beach at Mönsterås, Sweden. The land there is low-lying, the water dotted with many islands, not unlike the coast of Maine. Boberg was astounded simply by the majesty of clouds and light after a thunderstorm. His poem began:

*O mighty God, when I behold the wonder
Of nature’s beauty, wrought by words of Thine,
And how Thou ledest all from realms up yonder,
Sustaining earthly life in love benign,
With rapture filled, my soul Thy name would laud,
O mighty God! O mighty God!*

Boberg’s son later said that his father’s poem was a meditation on Psalm 8, “What is man that thou are mindful of him?”

Stuart K. Hine’s 1949 English version of the lyrics has become widely accepted throughout the world, through a kind of *sensus fidelium*. It has the clear structure of, first, two verses which express wonderment at God as Creator, and then two expressing even greater wonder at God as Savior. Here it is in full:

*O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hand hath made.
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.*

Refrain:

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

*When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze:
(Refrain.)*

*And when I think that God, His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin:
(Refrain.)*

*When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration,
And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art!
(Refrain.)*

Only Hine’s first two verses derive from Boberg. The second two were composed by Hine himself.

Hine was a missionary in Ukraine, but had to leave there because of Stalin’s artificial famine in 1932-33. Thus, his third verse is, in effect, a memorial to those 10 million murdered Christians...His last verse is a testament to refugees in the Second World War. Its basis was apparently the plight of a man he knew, an atheist, who was separated at the beginning of the war from his wife, a Christian. After they were separated, the man converted to Christianity. He spent the rest of the war seeking out his wife, to share with her his joy in their now common faith, but to no avail. This verse, then, expresses this man’s hope of an eternal union after death.

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