

“Guide me, O thou Great Jehovah” has been used for worship in congregations around the globe and across denominational lines. It was also incorporated in two of the most televised services of the last two decades, the funeral of Princess Diana of Wales (1997) and the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (2011). Why would this hymn be used for such significant occasions? Why has this hymn stood the test of time in so many worshiping communities?

The author of this widely popular hymn is William Williams (1717-1791), born in Carmarthenshire, Wales, to John and Dorothy Williams. According to Welsh hymn scholar Alan Luff, Williams grew up as an Independent and later a Calvinist, but had no aspirations to be a minister. In fact, he intended to be a doctor, attending school at the Dissenting Academy of LLwyn-llwyd, near Talgarth, Wales. It was near Talgarth that he first encountered the preaching of Howell Harris, which led to his conversion experience. Shortly after, he abandoned his Independent upbringing and desire to be a doctor to pursue ordination in the Established Church.

In 1744, after being accused of several misdemeanors against the Church of England, Williams devoted himself to Methodism. The Welsh text was written soon after this in 1745. While it is still a mystery as to how or why Williams began composing hymn-texts in his native tongue, United Methodist Hymnal editor Dr. Carlton Young states that he became known as the most famous hymn writer of Welsh Methodism. Traces of the hardship Williams experienced as a traveling minister can be found throughout “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah.”

Williams beautifully interweaves imagery from the Old Testament book of Exodus to evoke a sense of God’s guidance through strife. One of the reasons this hymn has influenced such a broad array of congregants is the universal subject of struggle. Every Christian, and indeed everyone, encounters difficulties. “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” affirms the reality that God provides for us and redeems all wrong in the world. This God who provided for the Hebrew people wandering amidst “barren lands” with “Bread of Heaven” is still and ever will be a God of provisional grace.

Open now the crystal fountain,

Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through.
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be Thou still my Strength and Shield.

In this stanza, Williams makes a reference to Exodus 13:21 – the “fire and cloudy pillar” that the Israelites followed by night and by day respectively. There is also a reference to a “crystal fountain” from “whence the healing stream doth flow.” This alludes to the water flowing from the rock for the Hebrew people in Exodus 17:6. These rich biblical references maintain the idea of a provisional God. In this text, we now encounter a God who provides sustenance for the hungry, guides his followers by day and by night, and quenches the thirst of those longing for water.

When I go through Jordan -
Cruel death in its force -
Thou Thyself suffered this before,
Why shall I fear further?
Victory!
Let me cry out in the torrent. (Literal translation from the Welsh)

The hymn ends in climactic fashion with the Hebrew people finally reaching their destination after forty years of wandering in the desert (Joshua 3:9-6:17). This stanza references the book of Joshua with the crossing of the river “Jordan” and the arrival at Canaan. The final lines conclude with exuberance, as the “people of Israel” sing of victory to their Redeemer and Provider.

While most modern hymnals are in agreement with the bulk of the hymn text, there are a few differences from hymnal to hymnal. In some hymnals, such as The United Methodist Hymnal (1989), the first line of stanza one reads “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,” while in others, including Evangelical Lutheran Worship (2006), the first line is “Guide me ever, great Redeemer.” As Welsh Anglican minister Sandy Grant writes, many people believe the word “Jehovah” is a mistranslation for the personal name for God, Yahweh (YHWH), revealed to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:13-15. To avoid confusion, the word

“Redeemer” is substituted to rightfully depict the God who led the Israelites out of bondage.

The hymn, originally written as six, six-line stanzas in Welsh, was published in 1762 in Williams’ collection of hymns entitled *Caniadau y rhai sydd ar y Mor o Wydr* (Songs of those upon the Sea of Glass). In 1771, Peter Williams (1722-1796), no relation to William Williams, translated the first, third, and fifth stanzas into English. The following year William Williams, or his son John, retranslated the third and fourth and added a new English stanza that incorporated Christ. Most modern-day hymnals include just the three stanzas originally translated by Peter Williams.

While, for Christians, it is vastly important to recognize Christ, the fourth stanza written by the original author draws away from the overall subject of God the Father as Provider/Redeemer. Thus, it is almost always excluded. The hymn is most commonly paired with the Welsh tune *CWM RHONDDA* (1907) composed by John Hughes (1873-1932), requiring repetition of the final line of text in the English translation. The original Welsh text has often been paired with the mid-nineteenth century tune *CAPEL Y DDÔL*.

“Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” has brought, and will continue to bring, comfort to thousands upon thousands of Christians with its exquisite reminder of a God who provides for those in need.

Source:

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