On the Trail of “All is Well”

Dr. Wade Kotter
Social Sciences Librarian
Stewart Library
Weber State University
Email: wdotter@weber.edu

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INTRODUCTION

On April 15, 1846, William Clayton recorded the following in his journal: “This morning I composed a new song – All is Well” (Clayton, 192: 19). From this rather simple beginning came the hymn commonly known today as “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” certainly the most widely known and among the most popular of all Mormon hymns (Dahl, 1981). Yet few who sing or listen to Clayton’s “new song” today realize that he based it on an older non-Mormon hymn, also known as “All is Well.” Today I will present recently discovered information on the history of the older hymn upon which Clayton based his “new song.” This new information brings into question many of the common beliefs and assumptions among Mormons regarding the original “All is Well.” It also provides a fascinating example of the impact of a non-Mormon hymn on early Mormon hymnody.

COMMON BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS

What are some of these common beliefs and assumptions about “All is Well” that are put into question by this new information? In preparation for this presentation, I queried a number of my Mormon musician friends regarding their knowledge of the history of Clayton’s “new song.” The majority simply indicated that Clayton wrote new words for an old English folk song. When I asked them when and where they thought Clayton learned this old folk song, the majority of them suggested that he must have learned it in England prior to his arrival in Nauvoo in 1840. Some added their opinion that it was an obscure song that was unknown to the Saints prior to their learning Clayton’s “new song.” When I showed them the original “All is Well,” several suggested that it must have been a funeral hymn.

Unfortunately, existing Mormon scholarship adds little of substance to our understanding of these issues. The most thorough discussion is provided by George D. Pyper in his Stories of
Latter-day Saint Hymns from 1939 (1939: 21-27). Pyper claims that Clayton’s source for “All is Well” was a popular southern shape-note tune book called The Sacred Harp, first published in 1844 (White & King, 1844). Pyper also claims that the compilers of The Sacred Harp derived their version from an earlier shape-note tune book called the Union Harmony (Caldwell, 1837). Furthermore, the tune, according to Pyper, is based on an old English folk song called “Good Morning, Gossip Joan,” which “still exists in Virginia oral tradition as ‘Good Morning, Neighbor Jones’” (Pyper, 1939: 24). Unfortunately, Pyper provides inadequate documentation in support of these claims. And as we shall see, nearly all of his claims are questionable. Unfortunately, most later Mormon authors, including J. Spencer Cornwall (1961: 21-25) and Paul E. Dahl (1981), simply repeat Pyper’s claims without questioning them or adding anything new. Although her commentary is also based in part on Pyper’s work, Karen Lynn Davidson (1988: 58-59) is a bit more conservative when she states that “All is Well” was “an older hymn, popular in [Clayton’s] day”and that is was “published as early as 1838.” Unfortunately, Davidson provides no documentation for this date. Perhaps Davidson based it on Pyper’s claim that “All is Well” was first published in the Union Harmony, which was actually published in 1837 (Caldwell, 1837). Unfortunately, Pyper was incorrect; the Union Harmony does not include “All is Well.”

ORIGIN OF THE TEXT

One of the most common assumptions regarding the original “All is Well” is that the text is English in origin. Over the last few years, I have located the text of the original “All is Well” in over ninety 19th and 20th century American collections, the earliest dating to 1836 (Pious Songs, 1836: 451-52). In contrast, I have found the text of the original “All is Well” in only one English hymn book belonging to the same time period, a collection of revival hymns published
in London by Thomas Pulsford in 1845 (Pulsford, 1845: 247-248). I have also found it on two broadsides dating to around 1850, both held by the British Library. Interestingly, in Pulsford’s 1845 collection, “All is Well” is found in an appendix made up of texts that are almost all of undoubted American origin. Pulsford must have had an American revival or camp meeting collection in hand when he put together his appendix. In my opinion, this provides strong circumstantial evidence for the American origin of the text.

In addition, two very early American publications (All is Well, 1839; May, 1840) refer to the text as “The Last Words of Bishop McKendree.” (see also Hatchett, 2003: 216). Bishop William McKendree, who died in February, 1835, was the Methodist Bishop of Nashville. In accounts of his last days extracted from a newspaper report on his death (Payne, 1874), Bishop McKendree is described as saying “All is well” several times when he was asked how he felt. He is also said to have quoted the following couplet from an old Charles Wesley hymn: “There’s not a cloud that does arise, to hide my Jesus from my eyes.” Both of these phrases ended up in the text of the original “All is Well.” My working hypothesis is that the original author published this poem in 1835 or early 1836, perhaps anonymously, after reading newspaper accounts of McKendree’s last words. As noted earlier, what we do know for certain is that “All is Well” appeared in a Methodist words-only camp meeting songster published in Baltimore in 1836 (Pious Songs, 1836: 451-52).

Additional circumstantial evidence for the American origin of this text comes from a comparative analysis of its meter, which is a uniquely American variant of the so-called “Captain Kidd meter,” a poetic form that originated in England but became very popular in America during the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Bronson, 1942; Bonner, 1944; Porter & Garst, 1979). In the years following the earliest known publication of the original “All is Well” text,
many new texts were published in America that share the same unique meter. And these are often published with the “All is Well” tune, or with a reference to “All is Well” as the recommended tune for the text.

ORIGIN OF THE TUNE

As with the origin of the text, there is little or no evidence to support the idea that the tune known as “All is Well” originated as an English folk song. In checking Pyper’s (1939: 24-25) claim regarding the tune’s folk origin, I have examined numerous versions of the folk tunes “Good Morning, Gossip Joan” and “Good Morning, Neighbor Jones” from a variety of English and American sources; none of these versions bears even a superficial resemblance to “All is Well.” Of course, it’s possible that Pyper did find versions of these folk songs that resemble “All is Well,” but since he failed to adequately document his sources, his claim must put aside for now. Also, the “All is Well” tune has not been found in any published folk song collection or manuscript source from England or other parts of the British Isles. Although this is an argument from negative evidence, there are several additional reasons to doubt the English origin of the tune.

For example, in 2004, with the help of my colleague Richard Hulan, I discovered what is currently the earliest known publication of the “All is Well” tune (Smith, E., 1838). On February 21, 1838, the editors of a Chambersburg, Pennsylvania newspaper called the Weekly Messenger of the German Reformed Church published both the text and tune of “All is Well.” The contributor, one E. S., did not claim responsibility for either text or tune, but he did indicate that he contributed the song because of its wide popularity. Both tune and text were also published later that year by Henry Smith in the 11th edition of his Church Harmony, a non-denominational shape-note tune book also published in Chambersburg (Smith, 1838: 297). Similarities between
the *Weekly Messenger* and *Church Harmony* versions make it almost certain that Henry Smith based his version on the one published earlier that year in the *Weekly Messenger*. Prior to these discoveries, the earliest confirmed publication of the “All is Well” tune dated to 1842, when the tune and words appeared in a pocket sized Baptist revival tune book called *Revival Melodies*, published in Boston (*Revival Melodies*, 1842). In his article reporting this discovery, David W. Music, a prominent Baptist hymnologist, indicates that he could find no evidence to support an English origin for the “All is Well” tune (Music, 1978). Music also refers to private communication he had with Alexander Schreiner, who reported to Music that he had failed to find any English sources for the tune during an extended visit to the music collection at the British Library. Instead, Music explores the possibility that the tune was composed by one Charles Dingley, a music editor and publisher from New York whose name is included with the music in *Revival Melodies*. However, the tune does not appear in any of Dingley’s known publications, and Dingley only claimed to have composed a few simple, nondescript tunes. When I informed him of the 1838 publications of the tune that Richard Hulan and I had discovered, Dr. Music (private communication) indicated that he agrees with my conclusion that Dingley was not the composer of the tune.

Since 2004, I have identified several additional American publications of this tune dating to 1842 or earlier (Bradbury and Saunders, 1841: 84-5; Day, 1842: 87; Funk, 1842: Appendage, 26-27; Scudder, 1842: 21). Importantly, each of these versions varies somewhat from the others in rhythm, melodic line, and harmony. As American folk hymn scholar Dorothy Horn notes (Horn, 1970: 17-18), this type of variation is a distinctive characteristic of folk tunes, especially during the period when they were first being written down. There was clearly no single, definitive version of the “All is Well” tune at this time, not what one would expect if the tune
were composed by an individual.

One fascinating aspect of the “All is Well” tune is that the beginning of the chorus is very similar to the beginning of the chorus in several other American and British folk tunes with a similar phrase structure. Folk music scholars attribute such similarities to a process called centonization, in which nearly identical melodic phrases are reused in the same structural position in a variety of otherwise unrelated folk melodies (Horn, 1970: 49-78). These melodic phrases can be thought of as building blocks that were used time and time again, in most cases unconsciously. They were simply a part of the folk tune melodic repertoire. Tunes that include a melodic phrase at the beginning of the chorus similar to that found in “All is Well” include “Leander” (a folk tune of definite American origin); “Be Gone Dull Care” (an English folk tune); “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” (an Irish folk tune that become popular in America); and “Hyferdol” (a Welsh hymn tune that may have been based on a folk song). Despite these similarities, the overall tunes are very different, indicating that none of these tunes in their full form is derived from any of the others, or from a single “mother” tune. So while these similarities do suggest a distant kinship between “All is Well” and the English folk song tradition, they do not imply that “All is Well” as a whole originated in the British Isles. In fact, folk tunes recorded in 19th century America that are known to be of direct English origin share many more similarities with their source than can be accounted for by the process of centonization.

**POPULARITY**

Another common assumption is that “All is Well” was a relatively obscure funeral hymn that was probably unknown to most of the Saints before and after Clayton created his “new song.” Recent research indicates, however, that the original “All is Well” may well have been
one of the most popular hymns in America between 1836 and 1846. I have identified 35 primary sources from this period that include the text, and sometimes the tune, of the original “All is Well” (see Appendices 1 & 2). Among these are collections published for use by a number of denominations, including Methodist, Baptist, Christian Connexion, Freewill Baptist, Church of God, Evangelical Association, German Reformed, Mennonite, and Protestant Episcopal. Of special interest is the fact that almost all of these collections were published for use in revivals, camp meetings, union meetings, prayer meetings, conference meetings, protracted meetings, and other forms of ecstatic social worship. The songs in these collections were undoubtedly among the more popular hymns of the day, as opposed to the more sedate, dignified hymns sung in “high church” worship services. It also seems to be no accident that most of the more conservative denominations of the period, including Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, did not include “All is Well” in their collections. Such denominations did not look kindly on revivals, camp meetings, and similar forms of ecstatic social worship.

These observations also raise serious doubts about the belief that “All is Well” was a solemn, mournful funeral hymn that Clayton raised from obscurity. People did not sing such hymns in revivals and camp meetings. In fact, an examination of the original text makes it clear that death is not the central focus of “All is Well.” Instead, the text focuses on the wonderful blessings awaiting the righteous when they pass to the other side. Methodists and other evangelicals were well known to “shout their way” to heaven, and this text fits that pattern exceptionally well. In fact, there are many other camp meeting hymns of a similar character. Also of interest is the fact that “All is Well” made it into at least three non-denominational collections intended for use in teaching young children to sing, a very unlikely use for a solemn, mournful funeral hymn (Bradbury and Saunders, 1841: 84-5; Day, 1842: 87; Fitz, 1843: 72-3).
The popularity of “All is Well” is also indicated by the appearance in 1840 of two very interesting parodies. One is titled “The Awakened Soul” and begins with the words “What’s this that stings, that stings my inmost soul? It is sin – it is sin.” (Weishampel, 1840). It goes on to elaborate on the perils of sin in several verses. The other parody, titled “The Contrast,” modifies the repeated phrase from “All is well” to “All’s not well.” This parody, printed immediately following “All is Well,” is directed to sinners who are not yet ready to meet their maker, calling on them to repent before it’s too late (Brown, 1840: 12-13).

Additional evidence for the popularity of the original “All is Well” is found in the appearance of a German translation bound in the back of some copies of the 1842 edition of *Die Geistliche Viole*, a words-only pocket hymn book published by the Evangelical Association of North America (1842). This German translation also appears in a words-only pocket hymn book published in 1842 by the German Reformed Church (1842: 310). The Evangelical Association and the German Reformed Church, both headquartered in Pennsylvania, were strongly influenced by the Methodist camp meeting movement.

A final piece of evidence supporting the popularity of the original “All is Well” is the publication of a “parlor music” version in 1839 by F. D. Benteen of Baltimore (*All is Well*,1839). This sheet music version includes a brief piano introduction and has some similarities to the 1838 versions from the *Weekly Messenger* and *Church Harmony*. It seems doubtful that Benteen would have published his “parlor music” version of “All is Well” if it were not already popular.

In light of this abundant evidence, it is most unlikely that Clayton was the only Mormon in Nauvoo who knew the original hymn. In fact, since converts streaming into Nauvoo from all parts of the country would almost certainly have brought their pocket hymn books with them, it seems quite likely that “All is Well” was well known in Nauvoo prior to the exodus.
CLAYTON’S SOURCE

Given that the original “All is Well” was so popular and widely published prior to 1846, it is impossible at present to identify with certainty the printed source, if any, upon which Clayton based his “new song.” In fact, it’s not out of the question that he depended on memory and not on a printed source. Even if he did have access to a printed source, there are at least two good reasons to believe that it was not The Sacred Harp (White and King, 1844), despite Pyper’s assertion (Pyper, 1939, 24-5). First, as George Pullen Jackson has demonstrated (Jackson, 1944), even though The Sacred Harp was published in Philadelphia, it never gained wide distribution or popularity outside of the deep South. The reason it was published in Philadelphia is that there were no publishers in the deep South capable of producing a shape-note tune book in large numbers. Second, the version of “All is Well” published in The Sacred Harp, attributed to J. T. White, is quite different from any other published version of the tune, including the first Mormon publication of the tune in the 1889 first edition of The Latter-day Saints’ Psalmody (Careless et al, 1889: 327). Interestingly, the closest parallels to this 1889 version are the 1838 and 1839 versions mentioned earlier. It is also quite different from most non-Mormon published versions of the tune appearing after 1846. This suggests two alternatives for the source of the 1889 Mormon version: either the compilers of the Psalmody had access to a very early printed version of the tune; or, more likely, they based their version of the tune on oral tradition, which by chance had faithfully retained many features of the earliest versions of the tune.

SUMMARY

In summary, the evidence and arguments I have presented today lead to several conclusions that stand in stark contrast to widely held beliefs and assumptions concerning the hymn upon which Clayton based his “All is Well.” Instead of being based on an old English folk
song, the text and tune of the original “All is Well” are almost certainly of American origin. Instead of learning the song in England, Clayton must have learned it after his arrival in Nauvoo. Instead of being an obscure funeral hymn unknown to most Saints in Nauvoo, it was one of the most popular camp meeting and revival hymns of the time, suggesting that many of the Saints were very familiar with it prior to the exodus. These conclusions, together with the powerful way in which Clayton’s new words fit their trying circumstances, help us better understand why “Come, Come, Ye Saints” became popular so quickly among the Mormon pioneers. The story of how the original “All is Well” was transformed into “Come, Come Ye Saints” is also an excellent example of the impact of non-Mormon hymns on early Mormon hymnody.
WORKS CITED

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