On the Trail of “All is Well”

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What is “All is Well”?  

- Original name of “Come, Come Ye Saints,” composed by William Clayton in 1846  
- Also the name of the older hymn upon which Clayton based this most famous of all Mormon hymns
Common Assumptions

- “All is Well” was an English folk song
- Clayton learned it in England before coming to Nauvoo in 1840
- The Mormons were unfamiliar with the text and tune until Clayton composed his version
- Based on recent discoveries, each of these assumptions is questionable
Origin of the Text

- Earliest identified publication of text dates to 1836 in a words-only Methodist camp meeting hymn book from Baltimore
- Sometimes titled “Last Words of Bishop McKendree”
- William McKendree was Methodist Bishop of Nashville, who died in February, 1835
- Accounts of his final illness state that he repeated the phrase “All is Well” several times
- Only known publications of text in England date to 1845 or later
- Meter and stanza pattern are a distinctly American variant of a common pattern in English & American folk songs known as the Captain Kidd meter
Origin of the Tune

- No known appearance of the tune in England, either before or after 1846
- Earliest identified American publications of the tune both date to 1838
- Multiple tune variants in the earliest publications strongly support a folk origin
- Beginning of chorus is very similar to several American and British folk melodies. These similarities are most likely the result of **centonization**
Tune Samples

- Weekly Messenger, 1838
- Church Harmony, 1838
- Sheet Music, Benteen, 1839
- Revival Melodies, 1842
- Leander
- Be Gone Dull Care
- When Johnny Comes Marching Home
- Hyfrydol
Popularity

- Widely published between 1836 & 1845 in collections from a variety of denominations
- “Parlor music” version published in 1839
- Two textual parodies published in 1840
- German translation published in 1842
- Several new texts appeared in the late 1830s using the distinctive “All is Well” stanza pattern
- Clayton cannot have been the only Mormon who knew it
- Was likely very well-known in Nauvoo
Clayton’s Source

- Text and/or tune published in over 30 different American collections from various denominations prior to 1846.
- Clayton must have learned the tune and text from one of these sources, or from another source not yet identified.
- This does not, however, mean that he had a source in hand when he “composed” his new song.
- The Sacred Harp (1844) is probably the least likely candidate for Clayton’s source.
In Summary

- Both text and tune are almost certainly of **American** origin.
- Clayton learned both text and tune **after** coming to Nauvoo.
- The Saints were most likely **very familiar** with both text and tune in 1846.
- This fact, together with the powerful way in which Clayton’s new words fit their circumstances, helps us understand why “Come, Come Ye Saints” rapidly become so popular among the Mormon pioneers.