

CHARLES WESLEY, THE *ODYSSEY*, AND CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

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In *Jesus Through the Centuries*, Jaroslav Pelikan refers to the use by Clement of Alexandria of the passage in Book XII of Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus tells his crew that, in order to prevent him from succumbing to the Sirens' song, they

must tie me hard in
hurtful bonds, to hold me fast in position upright against the
mast, with the ropes' end fastened around it; but if I
supplicate you and implore you to set me free, then you must tie
me fast with even more lashings.¹

A little later, Odysseus warns his helmsman of the dangers of the whirlpool Charybdis:

You must keep [the ship] clear from where the smoke and the breakers
are, and make hard for the sea rock lest, without your knowing,
she might drift that way, and you bring all of us into disaster.²

"It was Clement of Alexandria," says Pelikan, "who made the most effective and profound use [among the early Fathers] of the image of Odysseus at the mast as a foreshadowing of Jesus [on the cross]."³ He goes on to cite a passage from Clement's *Exhortation to the Greeks*, where Clement actually quotes the line about keeping the ship clear from the smoke and breakers and then urges his readers to avoid the siren song of earthly Pleasure. I quote here from the Roberts and Donaldson translation:

Sail past the song; it works death. Exert your will only, and you have overcome ruin;
bound to the wood of the cross, thou shalt be freed from destruction: the word of
God will be thy pilot, and the Holy Spirit will bring thee to anchor in the haven of
heaven.⁴

This Patristic comment connects with at least two Charles Wesley hymns, one still very familiar and the other now hardly known at all

¹*Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 42. The passage cited from Homer is XII, 158-64, in Richmond Lattimore's translation (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

²XII, 219-21, quoted in Pelikan, 43.

³Pelikan, 42.

⁴Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989 [Reprint of the Scribner's ed. of 1899-1905]), II, 205.

except among specialists and enthusiasts. The familiar hymn is of course "Jesu, Lover of my soul," where the second half of the first stanza is:

Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
Till the storm of life is past;
Safe into the haven guide;
O, receive my soul at last.⁵

The original title of the hymn is "In Temptation," and Clement in his comment on Homer is dealing with temptation, the temptation to succumb to the charms of ancient pagan custom—skillfully using one of the great classics of pagan literature to do so.

Here, Clement and Charles Wesley are both seeing things from the standpoint of the individual—a hypothetical "Greek" or "heathen" in Clement's case, a believer undergoing temptation in "Jesu, Lover of my soul." But in another Wesley hymn the nautical image modulates from individual into communal significance, for the church as a whole triumphant in the haven of heaven, and the metaphor is sustained for two stanzas. The whole hymn is worth quoting as it appears in the 1780 *Collection*:

1 Rejoice for a brother deceased!
Our loss is his infinite gain,
A soul out of prison released,
And freed from its bodily chain.
With songs let us follow his flight,
And mount with his spirit above,
Escaped to the mansions of light,
And lodged in the Eden of love.

2 Our brother the haven hath gained,
Out-flying the tempest and wind,
His rest he hath sooner obtained,
And left his companions behind,
Still tossed on a sea of distress,
Hard toiling to make the blest shore,
Where all is assurance and peace,
And sorrow and sin are no more.

3 There all the ship's company meet,
Who sailed with the Saviour beneath;
With shouting each other they greet,
And triumph o'er trouble and death;
The voyage of life's at an end.
The mortal affliction is past,
The age that in heaven they spend
For ever and ever shall last.⁶

⁵G. Osborn, ed., *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868-72), I, 259.

⁶John Wesley, *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists* (1780), ed. Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver Beckerlegge, and James Dale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), no. 48, 139-40.

The sources of the imagery in the second and third stanzas are obviously multiple, and on one level can certainly be related to Charles Wesley's own experience of sea travel—still a very risky business in the eighteenth century. The alarming storm experienced by both Charles and John Wesley on their way to Georgia is well known, but Charles Wesley's return to England on his own was also fraught with danger, the ship being near to sinking several times.⁷ When he returned from Ireland in October 1748 after one of his missions there, the storm was so severe that the master of the vessel was swept overboard, and Wesley was constrained to write "a thanksgiving hymn,"⁸ the second stanza of which concludes:

His piloting hand
Hath brought us to land,
And, no longer distress'd,
We are joyful again in the haven to rest.

The hymn ends:

With joy we embrace
The pledge of his grace,
In a moment outfly
These storms of affliction, and land in the sky.

Here Wesley is virtually plagiarizing himself, harking back to "Rejoice for a brother deceased," which was first published in the *Funeral Hymns* of 1746 and possibly written in 1744.⁹

Idiom and experience are fused here, but may it not be possible that the concept of the haven of heaven owes something to Clement of Alexandria's christianizing commentary on Homer, likely to appeal to the bright young student of Christ Church, trained in the classics at Westminster and starting to read the Fathers in earnest in the days of the Holy Club? Such reading would have informed his imagination and stayed with him till the end of his days.

⁷See Charles Wesley's *Journal* for October and November 1736. *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley*, ed. T. Jackson (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1980 [repr. of 1849 ed.]), I, 48–55, especially this, at the end of the voyage: "I returned thanks to God for bringing us to the haven where we would be" (I, 55).

⁸*Journal*, II, 38–40. I have not been able to locate the hymn, 39–40, in the *Poetical Works*.

⁹*Collection*, notes on 138, 139.