

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## ON THE "TE DEUM LAUDAMUS."

BY THE REV. W. ST. CLAIR TISDALL, D.D.

THE first words of this sublime hymn are mistranslated, obviously, in our Prayer-Book. Why is the accusative *Deum* employed, and why not the vocative? It is impossible to suppose that the writer and those who first accepted the hymn were ignorant of the rules of Latin grammar and fancied (as some people venture to suggest) that the vocative was "attracted into the accusative" because referring to the accusative "Te." The plain meaning of "Te Deum," "Thee as God," could not escape the understanding of the author (whoever he may have been). He meant to say, "We praise Thee *as* God," and therefore he said it unmistakably. Those at least who first used the words must have taken them in that sense, and doubtless meant something. Our present purpose is to inquire exactly what they wished to say, and to whom the hymn in its earliest form was addressed. This may lead to a result of some interest and importance. It may throw at least some slight light on the history of "this creed in verse," as it has well been called.

The common idea is that the hymn is a Trinitarian one; that the first eleven verses are addressed to the First Person of the Divine Trinity, the twelfth to the Second, the thirteenth to the Third Person, and the rest of the poem to the Second Person. But, if so, why is it deemed necessary to state so solemnly at the very beginning that the First Person is God? When was that ever denied by any Christian? or by any one else? It may have been desirable to declare belief in the Deity of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, for it is well known that certain heretical sects were unsound on these points. But Church History is silent regarding the existence of any sect of any importance that, claiming to be Christian, yet denied the Deity of God the Father. If then the first verse is addressed to the Father, why should the doctrine require such a forcible assertion, made not once but twice, in the very first verse? It is doubtless owing to the difficulty which our translators found, even in the First Prayer-Book of Edward VI, 1549, in answering this question that the accusative *Deum* was rendered "O God" as it has been ever since, contrary to the most elementary rules of

grammar, and that, too, by men who spoke Latin habitually, as easily as if it were their mother tongue.

It is quite clear that the writer made no mistake in his Latin, and therefore in using the accusative *Deum* he meant what he said. But what he said was, "We praise Thee *as* God." Therefore the first verse is *not* an address to the First Person of the Trinity, even though the use of the word *Patrem* in the second verse seems at first sight to confirm the common view. On the contrary, the expression "Aeternum Patrem" seems to me to lead us to the right explanation. This phrase is a translation of the two words אֵלֵינוּ in Isaiah ix. 6, which literally rendered mean "Father of Eternity." This has been taken as meaning "Eternal Father," whereas it signifies "Father (i.e. *Possessor*) of Eternity." We then perceive that the writer passes on to introduce a number of other phrases, borrowed mostly from the sixth chapter of the same Prophet, Isaiah, and the ascription of praise sets before our eyes the glorious vision which Isaiah relates in that chapter. Hence come the quotations "All the earth" (Isa. vi. 3) and the "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth." So, too, the mention of the Seraphim comes from verses 2 and 6 of the same chapter. The passage "Pleni sunt coeli et terra maiestatis gloriae tuae" is an amplification of Isaiah vi. 4; cf. Psalm lxxii. 19. Now Isaiah vi. is devoted to a description of Isaiah's vision of the Divine glory, and St. John tells us (John xii. 41), quoting verses 9 and 10 of this chapter, that "These things said Isaiah because he saw His (i.e. *Christ's*) glory, and he spake of Him." Hence we see that the author of the *Te Deum*, in the passages from that hymn quoted above, is referring not to the First but to the Second Person of the Trinity. This is confirmed by the words "Te martyrum candidatus laudat exercitus" referring to Revelation vii. 13 *sqq.*, just as the words "incessabili voce" recall to the worshipper's mind the passage Revelation iv. 8. We thus learn that the words *Te Deum* are correct, because they affirm the Deity of the *Son*, and that "Te Dominum confitemur" is a second declaration of the same great truth, referring to the Divine title *Κύριος*, used both in the LXX and in the New Testament as a version of the Ineffable Name, the Tetragrammaton, in accordance with such passages as Philippians ii. 9, "Gave unto Him the Name which is above every name," and to 1 Corinthians xii. 3, "No man can say, Jesus is LORD, but in

the Holy Spirit." This is why the vocative is *not* used in the first verse of the hymn.

Verses 10 and 11 of the hymn should be read as one sentence and rendered: "The holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge Thee *as* the Father (i.e. the Possessor, cf. *v.* 2) of infinite majesty." But the occurrence of *Patrem* here, taken as a reference to the First Person of the Trinity, seems to have led some early reader to think that the hymn could be improved by adding the next two clauses: "Thine honourable, true, and only Son; also the Holy Ghost, the Comforter." This addition made it into a Trinitarian hymn, much as our addition of the Gloria to each Psalm does.

If the thirteenth verse is part of the original hymn, the casual reference to the Holy Spirit in the words "Sanctum quoque Paracletum Spiritum," and no more, is somewhat strange, so much being said (adopting for the moment the common view) about both the Father and the Son. This might, it is true, be compared with the similar brevity of the "Apostles' Creed" on the same subject. But such a comparison would in itself be an argument against the comparatively late date usually assigned to the composition of the hymn. It would be an additional reason for holding, as I venture to do, that the *Te Deum* is very ancient. On the other hand, if verses 12 and 13 are a later insertion, the whole of the hymn would be addressed to Christ alone. The remaining verses, unless we except the final one, which is a quotation from Psalm lxxi. 1: "In Te, Domine, speravi; non confundar in aeternum," are evidently such.

This fact at once brings to the reader's mind a well-known passage in Pliny's Epistles (Lib. x., Ep. xcvi.—otherwise xcvi.—7), in which the writer tells the Emperor Trajan that the Christians of his Province, when the persecution was raging in Bithynia, were accustomed "*Stato die ante lucem convenire, carmenque Christo, quasi deo, dicere secum invicem.*" Is it possible that Pliny is referring to our *Te Deum* in its earliest form? The suggestion is a very tempting one. Can it be that in our Morning Service we are still privileged to use one of the very earliest hymns ever composed? one which was joined in by a part of the "white-robed army of martyrs" whose faith is recorded and whose courageous endurance of unimaginable sufferings even unto death was rewarded

by the granting of their prayer, "Aeterna fac cum sanctis Tuis in gloria numerari (or, better still, munerari)"? It may well be. If we regard the words "Venerandum Tuum verum et unicum Filium; Sanctum quoque Paracletum Spiritum," as a later addition, the great hymn exactly answers to the description which Pliny, or the Christians whom he persecuted, would give of it. A hymn dating from so early a period in the history of the Christian Church would not easily be disused or forgotten.

There seems to be no clear trace of it, however, in Greek, in which it was probably sung in Bithynia, though that would not be strange, since so much of early Christian literature has perished. Yet it would be early translated into Latin. As the quotations in the hymn in Latin are *not* from the Vulgate, it is exceedingly probable that, whether originally composed in that language or translated from the Greek, it is earlier than St. Jerome's time. Tradition ascribes it to St. Ambrose, or to Ambrose and Augustine in common, and it has been very generally supposed to be at least as old as Augustine's time. Some have seen in it a resemblance to certain passages in the Liturgy of Jerusalem, and again to the morning hymn of the Eastern Church which is found in the Alexandrine Codex of the New Testament. Dr. A. E. Burn (*Introduction*) has brought forward valuable evidence in support of his contention that the author of the *Te Deum* was a Dacian Bishop named Niketa of Remesiana, who lived about A.D. 400. But though the Bishop was evidently acquainted with the hymn, and may, perhaps, have added the two verses which seem to have been deemed desirable in order to introduce a confession of the doctrine of the Divine Trinity, it cannot be said that he has been proved to have composed it. In fact, the more attentively we study this "Creed with flesh and blood," as the late Dr. Alexander Stewart well styles it (*Creeds and Churches*, p. 107), this "most glorious of all the hymns of the Church," the more we feel convinced that it was originally a hymn to the Son alone, and probably closely associated, if not in its original form, identical with the ancient "Carmen Christo quasi deo" which early in the second century expressed the faith and set forth the comforting hope of the persecuted Church of the all-victorious Son of the Living God.

W. ST. CLAIR TISDALL.