

Jerusalem the Golden, with milk and honey blest

'Urbs Sion aurea' from *Hora novissima*, Bernard of Cluny 12th century and Hymns A & M editors 1861

Public Domain

Tune: EWING adapted from a tune by Alexander Ewing (1830-95), 1853

Public Domain

<https://youtu.be/jFh9P2ahrPU>

Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest,
Beneath thy contemplation sink heart and voice opprest.
I know not, O I know not, what social joys are there,
What radiancy of glory, what light beyond compare.

They stand, those halls of Sion, conjubilant with song,
And bright with many an angel, and all the martyr throng;
The Prince is ever in them, the daylight is serene,
The pastures of the blessed are decked in glorious sheen.

There is the throne of David, and there, from care released,
The song of them that triumph, the shout of them that feast;
And they who, with their Leader, have conquered in the fight,
For ever and for ever are clad in robes of white.

O sweet and blessed country shall I ever see thy face?
O sweet and blessed country, shall I ever win thy grace?
Exult, O dust and ashes! the Lord shall be thy part:
His only, his for ever, thou shalt be, and thou art!

Reflection: Gordon Giles

One of the Bible's most enduring visions of heaven is of a new Jerusalem: a city of God, in which the hustle and bustle of the saintly population is focussed on the praise of an ever present God, reigning on high. The name Jerusalem takes us back to the beginnings of the Old Testament and forward to the end of time. Jerusalem was not simply a city in ancient Judaism, it was a cultural phenomenon. It had various names: Salem, Ariel (Isaiah 29), Moriah (where Abraham took Isaac), the Holy City, the City of David, and Zion. There are two Greek names for the city: *Ierousalemi* is a transliteration of the Hebrew, but *Hierosolumai* actually means 'Holy City'. In the nineteenth century BC the Egyptians called it *Urusalimum* and a semitic version of this, *Urusalim* dates from the fourteenth century BC. In the seventh century BC Assyrian King Sennerachib called it *Ursalimmu*, a name made up of two roots, 'Uru' meaning 'city' and 'Salim', an Amorite God whose name lives on even in the Jerusalem of today.

Jerusalem is the place of some of the key events in Jesus' ministry, notably his triumphal entry, the turning over of the tables in the Temple and teaching and miracles. Jerusalem is the place of crucifixion and resurrection. It has also given its name to a place of heavenly hope as in the Book of Revelation, John's vision of a new Jerusalem, "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21:1-2). In Greek there are two words meaning 'new': one means 'brand new', but what John sees is 'new' in the sense that is clean and pure, heralding a new order. The same sense is found in the 'new' of covenant and testament. Indeed, in the end it is Christ who is the new Jerusalem, for the history of Jerusalem is effectively the story of salvation. And it is not over yet.

When Bernard of Cluny wrote the words to this hymn, he had John's revelations very much in mind. He gazed at the future new Jerusalem – heaven – and saw the time after the end of the world as the old City of God is transformed and a 'new' Jerusalem is inaugurated, as an embodiment of human hope for an eternal dwelling place in the presence of God. It is a wonderful place, with jasper walls, pearly gates and streets of gold. The river of life flows past the tree of life, yet it lacks sun, moon, day or night. For Bernard, and also to J.M Neale and the Victorians who put this hymn into *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, this is a heavenly vision of a place full of 'social joys', with feasting on milk and honey as did the Israelites when they entered the promised land of Canaan (See Deuteronomy 27:3). Added to this are numerous angels and eternal light emanating from the 'Leader' himself: Jesus Christ. As such it is a picture of the afterlife, promising as it does, a very pleasant, place of eternal music and companionship in the presence of God.

Bernard was a monk, originally from Murles (or Morlas) who entered the Abbey at Cluny in the first quarter of the twelfth century. He never left it, and while the date of his death is not known, he has become irrevocably associated with that place. His 3,000 line poem *De contemptu mundi* ('On condemning the world'), was written in Cluny and dedicated to Peter the Venerable, the General of the Cluniac Order. The lines "*Urbs Sion aurea, patria lactea, cive decora, omne cor obruis, omnibus obstruis et cor et ora*" are from that poem and form the opening lines of what we have come to know as 'Jerusalem the Golden'. The final verse we now sing, is not from this poem, but was compiled by the editors of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861.

The tune is named after its composer, the Aberdonian Alexander Ewing. He fought in the Crimean War in the 1850s, and then served in China and Australia. His tune adds poignancy and power to the vision of the heavenly city. It is a broad, inspirational melody, which soars heavenward in the third line, lifting our earthbound souls towards a fleeting glimpse of that which we are promised and for which we hope. This melodic movement is particularly effective in the first stanza, where the tune really does sink as we sing of 'heart and voice oppressed'! On the other hand, the text of the hymn is quite static, we find ourselves as enraptured observers of heaven, seeing through the glass

clearly for once, at a kind of snapshot of paradise. It is merely a taster of the heavenly banquet, but it will suffice until those social joys are truly ours.

God of the living and the dead, you give us delight on earth and the hope of heaven: inspire our thoughts and prayers that as we strive to follow you in our worldly pilgrimage, we may be ever mindful of the glorious destination towards which we journey, where the songs of Sion are sung unceasingly in the eternal splendour of your Kingly presence, for you reign, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.