

“Understandest Thou What Thou Singest?” – No. 2

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In an attempt to help us better understand some of the words and phrases of some of spiritual songs and hymns we sing, I offer the following additional comments to those of an earlier article:

1. When we sing “Ivory Palaces” we say in the second verse that “aloes had a part” in Jesus’ life. Aloes, a perfume made from the oil of a tree, was provided by Nicodemus to prepare the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:39) and thus it symbolizes the sorrow surrounding His death.
2. What is an “Ebenezer” (“O Thou Fount of Every Blessing”)? The word means “the stone of help” and it refers to a stone Samuel erected as a memorial of God’s miraculous help to Israel in routing the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:10-12).
3. In “Give Me the Bible” we sing of “the glory gilding Jordan’s wave” (some misread is as “gliding”). That which is gilded (gilt) is overlaid with gold. “Jordan’s wave” is a figurative reference to death (as Israel had to literally cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land, so we must all die to gain Heaven). Death holds men in fear, but the promises and comforts of God’s Word make even it attractive (as though gilded) for the faithful saint.
4. If you won a “guerdon” (“Beautiful Isle of Somewhere”), would you know what you had won? “Guerdon” simply means a reward and refers to the promise of God to reward His children in Heaven, that poetic “Beautiful Isle of Somewhere.”
5. “Tis Midnight, and on Olive’s Brow” has two expressions that some may miss. First, “Olive’s brow” does not refer to the forehead of Popeye’s sweetheart! Just east of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, is the Mount of Olives (“Olivet”) upon whose side (“brow”) is the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus retired there with His apostles and prayed His prayers of agony on the eve of the Crucifixion (John 18:1; Mat. 26:36). Second, the last verse of the song speaks of the “ether [not “either”] plains,” which is a figurative reference to the vast regions of space or Heaven.
6. What (or who) is “Ebon Pinion” in “Night, With Ebon Pinion”? “Ebon” refers to the color, black (as “ebony”). A “pinion” is the wing of a bird. The setting of this song is the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. This series of events was so dark and somber that it was as though, a great black bird, bearing doom, had cast its shadow over the Lord as he knelt in Gethsemane, was betrayed, tried and finally crucified.

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it was published in *The Edifier*, weekly bulletin of Pearl Street Church of Christ, Denton, TX, August 20, 1987, of which I was editor.]

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