

My Jesus, I Love Thee

~Other Speakers G-L: Hymn Stories:

Author --William R. Featherston, 1846-1873

Composer --Adoniram J. Gordon, 1836-1895

Tune Name --"Gordon"

"We love Him, because He first loved us." 1 John 4:19

It is difficult to realize that this beloved devotional hymn, which expresses so profoundly a believer's love and gratitude to Christ for what He has accomplished in redemption, was written by a teen-ager.

The author, William Ralph Featherston, (sometimes spelled Featherstone), was born on July 23, 1846, in Montreal, Canada, son of John and Mary Featherston. The family were members of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Montreal. It is thought that young Featherston penned these words at the time of his conversion experience, when only sixteen years of age. Though information about William Featherston is scarce, it is believed that he then sent the text to his aunt, Mrs. E. Featherston Wilson, living in Los Angeles, who in turn encouraged its publication. It is reported that the original copy of the poem, in the author's boyish handwriting, is still a cherished treasure in the family. Rather strangely, however, the hymn text appeared anonymously with a different tune in an English hymnal, The London Hymn Book, published in 1864.

The composer, Dr. A. J. Gordon, a well-known evangelical pastor of the Clarendon Street Baptist Church of Boston, Massachusetts, discovered this anonymous hymn in The London Hymn Book in 1870, and was attracted to its text. For several years Dr. Gordon had been working on assembling a new hymnal geared especially for Baptist congregations. As he meditated on the anonymous English hymn one day, he became dissatisfied with its existing melody, and as he later said, "In a moment of inspiration, a beautiful new air sang itself to me." The hymn in its present form first appeared in the hymnal, The Service of Song for Baptist Churches, compiled by S. L. Caldwell and A. J. Gordon and published in 1876. The hymn has been included in nearly every evangelical hymnal published to the present time. Dr. Gordon is also the composer for the rather well-known gospel song, "In Tenderness He Sought Me."

Adoniram Judson Gordon was born in New Hampton, New Hampshire, on April 19, 1836, and was named for the famed pioneer Baptist missionary to India-Burma. He died on February 2, 1895, in Boston, after a life of "unsurpassed usefulness to his fellowmen and devotion to his Lord." After graduating from Newton Theological Seminary, Gordon was ordained to the Baptist ministry, in 1863, and six years later was called to pastor the prestigious Clarendon Street Baptist Church of Boston. He became a close friend of Dwight L. Moody and was of great assistance in Moody's evangelistic efforts in Boston. Gordon's literary accomplishments included the editing of the hymnals: The Service of Song for Baptist Churches and The Vestry Hymn and Tune Book. He was also editor of a monthly periodical, The Watchword, as well as author of a series of books called Quiet Talks.

When studying the backgrounds behind our enduring hymns such as "My Jesus, I Love Thee," one never ceases to marvel at the workings of God in bringing together the necessary circumstances that make possible the birth and preservation of expressions such as these, which believers in every generation and culture can employ in their praise and adoration of the Almighty.