



Introduction

For several years now, I have given a lecture called “Sing Many Names: Expansive Images for God in Hymnody.” The lecture explores images for God used in historic and contemporary hymn texts, the relationship of these images to their appearances in scripture and Christian tradition, and how these images may influence our perceptions of the human family and the created order.

The title of the lecture is inspired by Brian Wren’s hymn *Bring Many Names*, printed in its entirety on the preceding page. I use Wren’s hymn as a starting point in the lecture for two reasons. First, it is full of potent and somewhat provocative images for God (more on that in a moment). Second, the hymn is brilliantly constructed, a persuasive essay in poetic form. The first stanza is the thesis statement, explaining what the hymn will do: It will bring together and celebrate myriad names for God, drawing on biblical stories and parables. Stanzas 2–5 are the “body” of the essay. They lay out the various names and images with a surprising, yet sensible, alternation of adjectives (*strong, warm, old, young*) and personifications (a mother, a father, an elderly person, and a youthful one). Each of these stanzas evocatively describes God doing something: planning creation, forgiving sins, crying out for justice. The sixth and final stanza serves as a doxological summary of the hymn. It reminds us that no matter how many names we may bring, God is “never fully known.” All our language and all our imagery cannot capture the wholeness of the living God, who will always remain (to some degree) in a mysterious “joyful darkness” beyond the edge of our understanding.

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When I give this lecture at conferences or in classes at Duke Divinity School, there is inevitably someone in the session who will question or challenge an image or two. Such questions provoke lively conversations about imagery, the poetic imagination, and—importantly for the purposes of this book—what is actually contained in the Bible. One semester, a student struggled with the image of God as *young* and *growing*, and questioned how such an image was supported in scripture. He had not considered the notion that a Savior who is born an infant and grows to adulthood must also pass through all the stages between. And he had temporarily forgotten the story of the youthful Jesus, whose worried parents found him in the temple, who later increased (or grew) “in wisdom and in years” (Luke 2:41-52). Thus, analysis of Wren’s hymn led to deepened consideration of the abundant images in the Bible, and the ways a poet might interpret those images to bring biblical stories and truths to a new light.

That lecture was one thread that led me to write this book. Another thread was the publication of *All Creation Sings*, the worship and song supplement to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.¹ Among its indexes and acknowledgments was an intriguing addition: a small section of four pages containing one hundred scriptural images for God, drawn from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible.² The worship staff of Augsburg Fortress and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America included this list authored by Gail Ramshaw to illuminate “the plethora of biblical images available for addressing the triune God.”³

A third and final thread, one that provided a template for this book’s structure, was Gail Ramshaw’s *Treasures Old and New: Images*

1. *All Creation Sings* (Augsburg Fortress, 2020).

2. *All Creation Sings*, 268–271.

3. *All Creation Sings*, 268.

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in the Lectionary.⁴ That book examines forty images from the readings of the three-year Revised Common Lectionary. Each chapter features a single image, with quotes from scripture, excerpts from the writings of the church fathers and mothers, stanzas of hymns and other sacred poetry, and an essay unpacking the image and its use. It is a marvelous resource and should be on the bookshelf of every pastor, cantor, and leader responsible for planning liturgies or preaching sermons.

Sing Many Names: Scriptural Images for God in Hymnody is, in a sense, a response to all the above. Eighteen primary images from the list in *All Creation Sings* are presented here, grouped under the same headings. Each image is presented with passages from the NRSV Updated Edition (NRSVue) Bible that feature the image, and a quotation from a primary hymn text that explores it. A brief essay probes the “imagination” behind the image, its usage in scripture, and its appearance in multiple hymns. Finally, each chapter concludes with a list of hymns in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, *All Creation Sings*, and *Lutheran Book of Worship* that relate to the image.

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4. Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Fortress Press, 2002).

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you learn more when you teach, and the students at Duke Divinity continue to broaden my own education.

Finally, a word of thanks to Paul Westermeyer, my mentor and friend, and the person to whom (with my spouse and daughter) this book is dedicated. Paul's teaching, writing, and research on hymnody and church music have shaped the way the church thinks about and sings its song for more than four decades. His students—especially the ninety-six of us from the former Master of Sacred Music program at Luther Seminary and St. Olaf College—are teaching, composing, writing, playing, preaching, and leading worship in the church today. Without Paul, I would not be doing what I am doing, and I certainly would not have written this book. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Zebulon M. Highben

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*Commemoration of Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig,
bishop, hymnwriter, and renewer of the church*