

MEN AND CHILDREN EVERYWHERE



Which part of a hymn do you think is usually written first: the words or the music? (Words is correct!) But for this hymn the tune came first. “Rock of Ages” (or in Hebrew, “Mooz Tsur”) for hundreds of years has been sung at the Jewish Feast of Lights, “Hanukkah.” Perhaps your Jewish friends could tell you about the feast, and maybe invite you.

The Old Testament speaks of God as our “Rock,” which means that He will last forever, is strong, is protection from enemies, and a hiding place in time of danger and trouble. Here is a translation of the original Hebrew hymn. Try singing it once you have learned the tune.

Rock of Ages, let our song
Praise Thy saving power;
Thou amidst the raging foe,
Wast our sheltering tower.
Furious they assailed us,
But Thine arm availed us,
And Thy Word
Broke their sword
When our own strength failed us.

Hanukkah celebrates the victory of Judas Maccabeus over the Syrians who had captured Jerusalem. In preparing the Temple for worship again, they found some oil which the Syrians had not destroyed. When it was placed in the Temple lamp, the oil burned miraculously for eight days. (Some hymnals have a tune called “Judas Maccabeus” set to the Easter hymn, “Thine is the glory.”)

Charlotte Lockwood Garden, organist of Crescent Avenue Presbyterian Church in Plainfield, New Jersey, knew “Rock of Ages” (she also played for a synagogue) and asked her pastor, Dr. John J. Moment, if he would write a new text. He listed 16 people and things which can sing, do sing, or should sing “Holy, holy” to our God who is glorious. Can you find them all?

There are three phrases which may need explanation. (1) “Men and children” – why didn’t Dr. Moment say “Men and boys?” Or did he mean that “man” is a word that means all people, including women, and that children includes girls and boys? (2) In stanza 2 a rainbow is called God’s “Covenant sign.” In the story of Noah and the flood (Genesis 9:12-17), the rainbow was a promise by God that he never again would send a flood to destroy the earth. (3) “Far domain” in stanza 2 means the area over which God rules – everywhere.

The tune is different from most songs you sing in church. The first two lines are the same, but the last two are entirely different. It is fun to march up the start of line 3 and then float down on the word “song.” And the 4th line with its sequence on “Holy, holy” is neat. But nicest of all is the bouncy beginning!