

“Once in Royal David’s City – Hymn Story and Scripture Allusions”

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by Whitney V. Myers



Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895)
(Ref. 1)



Henry J. Gauntlett (1805-1876) (Ref. 1)

"Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child" (Luke 2:4).

This article explores the story behind and the scripture allusions in the hymn, "Once in Royal David's City."

Hymn Text Writer

Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895) was an Anglo-Irish hymnodist and poet. Mrs. Alexander's hymns and poems though her lifetime number nearly

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400 (Ref. 2). She is best known for her hymns, "All Things Bright and Beautiful," "There is a Green Hill Far Away," and the Christmas carol, "Once in Royal David's City" (Ref. 3).

As an adult, Cecil Frances Alexander wrote primarily for children. She felt that the truths of Christianity could best be taught through hymns (Ref. 4 below). In 1848, Cecil Frances Humphreys (her name before she married) wrote a series of hymns to teach children about the Apostles Creed (Ref. 4, Ref. 5). She wrote "Once in Royal David's City" to explain to children the phrase from the Apostle's Creed that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:34-35 KJV, Ref. 4, Ref. 5).

Hymn Tune Composer

Henry John Gauntlett (1805-1876) was an English organist and songwriter (Ref. 6). He was also, in turn, a lawyer, author, organ designer, and organ recitalist (Ref. 7). He composed over 1,000 hymn tunes. His most famous tune is "Irby," the tune to which we sing the Christmas carol, "Once in Royal David's City" (Ref. 6).

Scripture Allusions

I suggest that you refer to the attached hymn sheet music (Ref. 8) for the following discussion of Scripture and the four verses of hymn text.

"Once in royal David's city" (hymn, verse 1). In the Bible, the words, "city of David," refer to two locations. In the Old Testament, the city of David referred to the area of Jerusalem that David captured as described in 1 Chronicles 11:4-8. David built houses there and lived there (1 Chronicles 15:1). David was buried in the city of David (1 Kings 2:10).

In the New Testament, Luke refers to David's ancestral home, Bethlehem, as the city of David (Luke 2:4, 1 Samuel 17:12). Luke also tells what the angel said when the angel appeared to the shepherds and announced Jesus' birth. "For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). After the angel had spoken to the shepherds, the shepherds were clear that the location they were to go visit was in Bethlehem (Luke 2:15).

"He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all" (hymn, verse 2). The words, "He came down to earth from heaven" refer to the incarnation of Christ. The Gospel of John says, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" ([John 1:14](#)).

"He feels for all our sadness, and he shares in all our gladness" (hymn, verse 3). Jesus was fully God and fully human ([John 1:1](#), [John 1:14](#), [Colossians 2:9](#), [Ref. 9](#)). As a human being, Jesus experienced the full range of human emotions, yet without sin ([Hebrews 4:15-16](#)). For example, Jesus knew grief and sorrow ([Isaiah 53:3](#), [John 11:33-35](#)). Jesus knew joy ([Hebrews 12:2](#)).

"He leads his children on to the place where he has gone" (hymn, verse 4). Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all" ([Luke 18:17](#)). The Gospel of John tells us, "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God" ([John 1:12](#)).

The hymn's words, "He leads his children," speak to me both of Jesus *leading* and we who believe in Jesus Christ *following* him ([Ref. 10](#)). Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" ([John 14:6](#)). We know that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us in heaven ([John 14:2-3](#)). Once we put our trust in Jesus Christ, he leads us and we follow him through life to his eternal home.

Listen

Listen and watch The Choir of King's College, Cambridge, UK sing "Once in Royal David's City." [Click here for the YouTube link - Ref. 11](#). To see and follow the lyrics for the six verses sung in the video, [click here - Ref. 12](#).

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for coming down from heaven to earth to become a human being. Thank you, Jesus, that you know our emotions and that you strengthen us when we are weak. Thank you, Jesus, that when we believe in and accept you, you lead us through life to your eternal home.

References

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Once in Royal David's City

1 Once in ro - yal Da - vid's_ ci - ty stood a low - ly cat - tle_

2 He came down to earth_ from_ hea - ven who is God and Lord_ of_

3 Je - sus is our chil - dhood's pat - tern, day by day like us_ he_

4 And our eyes at last_ shall_ see him, through his own re - deem - ing_

shed, where a mo - ther laid_ her_ ba - by in a

all, and his shel - ter was_ a_ sta - ble, and his

grew; he was lit - tle, weak, and help - less, tears and

love; for that child, so dear_ and_ gen - tle, is our

man - ger for_ his_ bed: Ma - ry was that mo - ther

cra - dle was_ a_ stall: with the poor and meek and

smiles like us_ he_ knew: and he feels for all our

Lord in heaven a - bove: and he leads his chil - dren

mild, Je - sus Christ her lit - tle_ child.

low - ly lived on earth, our Sa - vior_ ho - ly.

sad - ness, and he shares in all_ our_ glad - ness.

on_ to the place where he_ has_ gone.

Text: Cecil F. Alexander (1818-1895)
Tune: Henry J. Gauntlett (1805-1876)



87 87 77
IRBY
www.hymnary.org/text/once_in_royal_dauids_city_stood_a_lowly