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'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild'
Variations on a Nursery Theme,
for Congregation and Critic

By Eric J. Sharpe

It was Professor Gordon Rupp who once suggested that the English language needed the word 'rebunk' to denote the activity of those who perform the necessary task of rehabilitating what has been wrongly 'debunked'. Professor Sharpe considers that the time has come to carry out this task for a much-maligned children's hymn.

Everyone knows that there is a children's hymn which begins with the verse

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child;
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to Thee.

To me it conjures up pictures, not of Sunday school (I never went to Sunday school), but of a certain point in the Sunday morning service at a tiny Methodist chapel in the north of England, a chapel since destroyed in the interests of town planning. Ironically, having been cleared, the site was never built on — which fact might perhaps serve as a sermon illustration. But there is another type of sermon illustration which also comes to mind when I hear or read these words. It is not uncommon. One hears it regularly declaimed from the pulpit, and some of us may even have used it ourselves. I last heard it on May 8th, 1977, as part of an otherwise excellent sermon from a prominent Evangelical Anglican layman. I paraphrase: 'Liberal Protestantism, in its well-meaning but mistaken quest for "the Jesus of history", seized on some features in the life and ministry of Jesus and, in the belief that it was revealing the whole, produced only a caricature. It produced "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild", a figure lacking in strength and so innocuous that no one could possibly have wanted to crucify him.' Instead of this namby-pamby Jesus, we are today presented with a figure possessed of 'power, tremendous power, utterly controlled'.¹

Who first held up to ridicule 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' I am not sure; but it may have been George Bernard Shaw. In his Preface to *Androcles and the Lion*, Shaw wrote: "'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" is a snivelling modern invention, with no warrant in the gospels. St. Matthew would as soon have thought of applying such adjectives to Judas Maccabeus as to Jesus; and even St. Luke, who makes Jesus polite and gracious, does not make him meek.' The image of Jesus as 'an English curate of the farcical comedy type', Shaw went on, warming to

¹ E. V. Rieu, *The Four Gospels* (1952), xxx.

his work, may have its place in the nursery; but such a figure as that of the 'meek and mild' Jesus could not possibly command respect, suggesting as it does only defeat and disgrace.²

Since Shaw's day, preachers and apologists have queued up to make substantially the same point. To take only one example, in his book *Your God is too small* (1952), J. B. Phillips conjures up, on a basis of these same words, 'a picture of someone who wouldn't say "bo" to the proverbial goose; someone who would let sleeping dogs lie and avoid trouble wherever possible; someone of a placid temperament who is almost a stranger to the passions of red-blooded humanity; someone who is a bit of a non-entity, both uninspired and uninspiring.'³ And summing up, he asserts bluntly that Jesus 'was love in action, but He was not meek and mild'.⁴

Latterday hymnologists have done little better. Their doyen, Erik Routley, only succeeds in misquoting Shaw as having called the first line of the hymn a 'snivelling travesty'. True, he does go on to note that the hymn 'contains none the less some fine thoughts'⁵ — but he does not develop the point, perhaps because of the initial impact of that fatal first line.

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At the turn of the century, as we might have expected, bearing the 'liberal Protestants' in mind, and recalling that Shaw was not one of them, standards would seem to have been somewhat different. John Brownlie, for instance, in his book *The Hymns and Hymn Writers of the Church Hymnary* (1899) calls 'Gentle Jesus' an 'inimitable hymn', and notes that 'There are few children who have not been taught the sweet words of this hymn'.⁶ He records also that it was to be found at that time in seven out of fifteen popular adult hymnals, and in seven out of nine 'children's collections' — eloquent testimony to its popularity, and perhaps its baneful influence. Popularly, therefore, this hymn has taken its place alongside the more sentimental reflections of Ernest Renan as the epitome of a weak moralist — a figure which twentieth-century Christianity utterly rejects.⁷

And yet, when all this has been said, there remains one fact about this hymn which most — if not all — of its critics appear to have overlooked.

² G. B. Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion* (Penguin ed. 1949), 12f.

³ J. B. Phillips, *Your God is too small* (1952), 21f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵ E. Routley, *Hymns and Human Life* (1952), 251.

⁶ J. Brownlie, *The Hymns and Hymn Writers of the Church Hymnary* (1899), 264.

⁷ E. Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (E.T. 1935, first publ. 1863), 99: 'His (Jesus') preaching was gentle and pleasing, breathing nature and the perfume of the fields. He loved the flowers, and took from them his most charming lessons . . .'

It was not a product of the late nineteenth century, conceived and written by some pious Victorian poetaster for *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861). It was written by someone who, in the words of Bernard Lord Manning, '... is obsessed with one theme: God and the Soul; for the stage in space and time on which that drama is set he has little concern. He is always at Calvary; no other place in the universe matters ...'⁸ That 'someone' was none other than Charles Wesley.

Once this elementary fact has been recognized, then the whole question of the meaning and the atmosphere of the hymn has to be looked at in a new light. Would Charles Wesley ever have been *capable* of projecting, even for the benefit of children, an image of a weak, spineless Jesus? If he did, then the least one can say is that it would have been startlingly out of character. But if he did not, then what *did* he do? Might it be that the words 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' do not mean what Shaw, and companies of modern preachers, suppose that they mean, and that when Charles Wesley wrote them, he intended to convey an impression quite different from that which they convey to the uncritical modern reader? Undeniably, the cumulative effect at the present time of the words 'gentle', 'meek' and 'mild' is of something (or someone) insipid; but was this what Wesley intended? I shall argue that it was not; that, on the contrary, 'Gentle Jesus' is a hymn which is strong, positive, and above all biblical.

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The two hymns from which 'Gentle Jesus' was compiled were first published in Charles Wesley's *Hymns and Sacred Poems* of 1742, and were reprinted in *Hymns for Children* (1763). Verses one and two are taken from Hymn 72 in a set of 'Hymns for the Youngest', and verses three to eight from Hymn 73.⁹ In the 1870 edition of *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (Volume VI), they appear as follows:

<i>Part I</i> (Hymn LXXII)	<i>Methodist</i> <i>Hymnbook</i> (MHB)	<i>Hymns Ancient</i> <i>Modern</i> (HAM)
1.	1.	1.
Gentle Jesus, meek and mild	Gentle Jesus, meek and mild	
Look upon a little child; Pity my simplicity, Suffer me to come to Thee.		

⁸ B. L. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* (1942), 43.

⁹ J. Telford, *The New Methodist Hymn-Book Illustrated* (5th ed. 1948), 387f.

	2.		2.		2.
	Fain I would to Thee be brought; Dearest God, forbid it not Give me, dearest God, a place In the kingdom of Thy grace.		Gracious Lord, forbid it not In the kingdom of Thy grace Give a little child a place.		HAM Revised (1950) changes second 'dearest God' to 'blessed Lord'
	3.		omitted		omitted, except lines 1-2
	Put Thy hands upon my head; Let me in Thine arms be stay'd: Let me lean upon Thy breast; Lull me, lull me, Lord, to rest.				
152	4.		omitted		omitted
	Hold me fast in Thine embrace, Let me see Thy smiling face; Give me, Lord, Thy blessing give; Pray for me, and I shall live:				
	5.		omitted		3. HAM Revised: Hide me, from all evil hide, Self and stubbornness and pride; Hold me fast in thine embrace, Let me see thy smiling face. — combining 7:3-4 and 4:1-2
	I shall live the simple life Free from sin's uneasy strife; Sweetly ignorant of ill, Innocent and happy still.				
	6.		omitted		omitted
	Oh that I may never know What the wicked people do! Sin is contrary to Thee, Sin is the forbidden tree.				

7. Keep me from the great offence Guard my helpless innocence; Hide me, from all evil hide, Self, and stubbornness, and pride.	omitted	omitted, except lines 3-4
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Part II (Hymn LXXIII)

8.
Lamb of God, I look to
 Thee,
Thou shalt my example
 be:
Thou art gentle, meek,
 and mild,
Thou wast once a little
 child.

MHB

5.

HAM

4.

9.
Fain would I be as Thou
 art;
Give me Thy obedient
 heart;
Thou art pitiful and
 kind,
Let me have Thy loving
 mind.

3.

5.

Fain I would be . . .

10.
Meek and lowly may I
 be;
Thou art all humility:
Let me to my betters
 bow,
Subject to Thy parents
 Thou.

omitted

omitted

11.
Let me, above all, fulfil
God my heavenly
 Father's will;
Never His good Spirit
 grieve,
Only to His glory live.

4.

6.

	12.	6.	Part 3
	Thou didst live to God alone, Thou didst never seek Thine own, Thou Thyself didst never please, God was all Thy happiness.		7.
	13.	7.	8.
	Loving Jesus, gentle Lamb! In Thy gracious hands I am; Make me, Saviour, what Thou art; Live Thyself within my heart.		
154	14.	8.	9.
	I shall then show forth Thy praise, Serve Thee all my happy days: Then the world shall always see Christ, the holy Child, in me. ¹⁰		

These are the only two of Charles Wesley's hymns for children which have survived, albeit in a truncated form. They were among the earliest of his poetical compositions, dating from around 1740, at which time he was unmarried and seemingly had little or no experience of children. F. A. Jones wrote in 1905 that ' . . . it cannot be said that he was ever very successful as a writer for the young'^{10a} — and looking at his few efforts in this direction, one is forced to agree. What would any child, one wonders, make of this verse, from Hymn LXXV?

Let the potsherds of the earth
Boast their virtue, beauty, birth;
A poor, guilty worm I am,
Ransom'd by the bleeding Lamb.

¹⁰ *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, Vol. VI (1870), 441-3. For another full version, with some notes, see F. Baker (ed.), *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* (1962), 40-2.

^{10a} F. A. Jones, *Famous Hymns and their Authors* (1905), 256.

Or this, from Hymn LXXVII:

Then let us thank Him for His grace;
He will not disapprove
Our meanest sacrifice of praise,
Our childish, prattling love.

However, it is a barren and unprofitable exercise to judge Charles Wesley by the standards of Piaget, Goldman and Loukes. The question is not whether Wesley was guilty of misjudging the children of the 1740's, but whether in writing 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' he was misrepresenting Jesus. At all events, a couple of hours spent with a concordance show that even in his children's hymns, Wesley never strayed very far from the words of Scripture. Direct and indirect references to the Bible abound in them, as in all hymns of John and Charles Wesley.¹¹ The basic reference is, of course to Mark 10:13ff. Apart from this, some of the more obvious allusions include:

- | | | |
|--|---|-----|
| 1. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild | Now I Paul myself beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ 2 Cor. 10:1 | 155 |
| Look upon a little child; | . . . as a little child . . . Mk. 10:15 | |
| Pity my simplicity, | Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. Ps. 103:13 | |
| Suffer me to come to Thee. | Suffer the little children to come unto me. Mk. 10:14 | |
| 2. Fain I would to Thee be brought; | And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them; Mk. 10:13 | |
| Dearest God, forbid it not; | . . . and forbid them not . . . Mk. 10:14 | |
| Give me, dearest God, a place)
In the kingdom of Thy grace) | . . . for of such is the kingdom of God. Mk. 10:14 | |
| 3. Put Thy hands upon my head; | And he . . . put his hands upon them. Mk. 10:16 | |
| Let me in Thine arms be stay'd; | And he took them up in his arms . . . Mk. 10:16 | |
| Let me lie upon Thy breast; | He then lying on Jesus' breast . . . Jn. 13:25 | |
| Lull me, lull me, Lord, to rest. | . . . ye shall find rest for your souls. Jer. 6:16; Mt. 11:29 | |

¹¹ On this subject, see H. Bett, *The Hymns of Methodism* (3rd ed. 1945), 71ff.

4. Hold me fast in Thine embrace,
Let me see Thy smiling face;
Give me, Lord, Thy blessing
give;
Pray for me, and I shall live.
5. I shall live the simple life,
Free from sin's uneasy strife;
Sweetly ignorant of ill,
Innocent and happy still.
6. Oh that I may never know
What the wicked people do!
Sin is contrary to Thee,
Sin is the forbidden tree.
7. Keep me from the great offence,
Guard my helpless innocence;
Hide me, from all evil hide,
Self, and stubbornness, and pride.
8. Lamb of God, I look to Thee,
- There remaineth therefore a rest to
the people of God. Heb. 4:9
Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe
Ps. 119:117
. . . underneath are the everlasting
arms . . . Deut. 33:27
Make thy face to shine upon thy
servant; and teach me thy statute.
Ps. 119:135
let the blessing come upon the head
of Joseph. Deut. 33:16
. . . for he is a prophet, and he shall
pray for thee, and thou shalt live . . .
Gn. 20:7
. . . the testimony of the Lord is
sure, making wise the simple.
Ps. 19:7
The Lord preserveth the simple.
Ps. 116:6
Let nothing be done through strife or
vainglory. Phil. 2:3
I would have you wise unto that
which is good, and simple concerning
evil. Rom. 16:19
. . . then shall I be upright, and I
shall be innocent of the great
transgression. Ps. 19:13
But of the tree of the knowledge of
good and evil, thou shalt not eat of
it. Gen. 2:17
Keep back thy servant also from
presumptuous sins . . . I shall be
innocent from the great
transgression. (cf. Phil. 1:10)
Ps. 19:13
Hide me under the shadow of thy
wings. Ps. 17:8
Behold the Lamb of God . . .
Jn. 1:29

- Thou shalt my example be: Looking unto Jesus . . . Heb. 12:2
For I have given you an example,
that ye should do as I have done to
you. Jn. 13:15
- Thou art gentle, meek, and mild,
Thou wast once a little child. 2 Cor. 10:1 (see v.1)
9. Fain I would be as Thou art; It is enough for the disciple to be as
his master, and the servant as his
Lord. Matt. 10:25
- Give me Thy obedient heart; . . . he humbled himself, and
became obedient unto death . . .
Phil. 2:8
- Thou art pitiful and kind; . . . the Lord is very pitiful . . .
James 5:11
. . . for he is kind to the unthankful
and to the evil. Lk. 6:35
- Let me have Thy loving mind. Let this mind be in you, which was
also in Christ Jesus. Phil 2:5
10. Meek and lowly may I be; Take my yoke upon you, and learn
of me; for I am meek and lowly in
heart . . . Matt. 11:29
- Thou art all humility:
Let me to my betters bow, . . . he humbled himself. Phil. 2:8
. . . in lowliness of mind let each
esteem others better than themselves.
Phil. 2:3
- Subject to Thy parents Thou. And he went down with them, and
came to Nazareth, and was subject
unto them . . . Lk. 2:51
11. Let me, above all, fulfill
God my heavenly Father's will; I have found David, the Son of
Jesse, a man after mine own heart,
which shall fulfill all my will.
Acts 13:22
- Never His good Spirit grieve,
Only to Thy glory live.
12. Thou didst live to God alone; . . . for all live unto him . . .
Lk. 20:38
- Thou didst never seek Thine own; For all seek their own, not the things
which are Jesus Christ's . . .
Phil. 2:21
- Thou Thyself didst never please, If I pleased men, I should not be the
servant of Christ. Gal. 1:10

God was all Thy happiness.

If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them. Jn. 13:17

13. Loving Jesus, gentle Lamb!

In Thy gracious hands I am:

Yea, he loved the people; all his saints are in thy hand. Deut. 33:3
Into thy hands I commit my spirit
Ps. 31:5

Make me, Saviour, what Thou art;

Live Thyself within my heart.

. . . yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. Gal. 2:20

14. I shall then show forth Thy praise,

O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.
Ps. 51:15

Serve Thee all my happy days:

. . . for ye serve the Lord Christ . . .
Col. 3:24

O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Ps. 90:14

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Then the world shall always see
Christ, the holy Child, in me.

. . . thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed . . . Acts 4:27

. . . Christ in you, the hope of glory.
Col. 1:27

Even when writing for the youngest Methodists, Charles Wesley was not prepared to substitute vague moralizing sentiment for a genuine Biblical approach to life. There remain, however, the offending words 'gentle', 'meek' and 'mild', and we must now look at these.

I. GENTLE

In the Authorized (King James) Version, the English word 'gentle' is found five times, in 1 Thess. 2:7, 2 Tim. 2:24, Tit. 3:2, James 3:17 and 1 Pet. 2:8. Of these particular significance, it seems to me, attaches to 2 Tim. 2:24, where it is said that 'the servant of the Lord must be . . . gentle (ἡπιον) unto all men' — which the New English Bible alters to 'kindly towards all men'. Otherwise Paul tells the Thessalonians that he and his companions were 'gentle' (ἡπιτοι) among you'; and in 1 Peter some slave owners (not others) are allowed to have been 'good and gentle'. Gentleness, therefore, is at the very least a Christian virtue.

But more important are the passages in which Jesus Christ himself is described in the same terms. For instance, in the Messianic prophecy of

Isaiah 40:11, it is said that 'He shall . . . gently lead those who are with young'. And in 2 Cor. 10:1 Paul exhorts his hearers/readers 'by the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (διὰ τῆς πραΰτητος καὶ ἐπιεικίας τοῦ χριστοῦ) — a verse which almost certainly lies at the back of the first line of Wesley's hymn, and to which I shall return shortly. It is this quality in Christ, which is held out by Paul as an example to Christians. In Gal. 5:22 Paul says that one 'fruit of the Spirit' is 'gentleness' (πραΰτης). In the first of these verses, incidentally, the New English Bible has replaced 'meekness and gentleness' by 'gentleness and magnanimity', though in the second the translation 'gentleness' has been allowed to stand.

It is worth bearing in mind at this point that the English word 'gentle' once — and certainly still in Wesley's day — carried a much subtler meaning than it does today. I do not propose to digress widely on this subject, but one example may perhaps help to demonstrate the point. In the *Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer writes about the Knight in terms which make it clear that he was strong, courageous and gentle at one and the same time. Concerning his battle record there was no question: 'At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene.' Nevertheless his personal deportment was neither coarse nor overbearing, and he never used his military status to lord it over lesser mortals, far below him in rank. Are we, then, surprised to find the Knight described as both 'meek' and 'gentle'? Perhaps we are. The passage reads:

And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
He never yet no vileynye ne sayde,
In all his lyf, unto no maner wight.
He was a verray parfit, gentil knyght.

(lines 68-72)

A famous Professor of English, of a former generation, told by a rash student that Chaucer was 'simple', invited her to interpret for him the last line of this passage. She emerged from the encounter a sadder and wiser person. The words 'meeke', 'verray', 'parfit' and 'gentil' all imply control, truth, courtesy and not weakness, but considerateness towards the weak. When suffering had to be borne, the 'meeke', 'gentil' knight would have the resources to bear it, and would not crumble under it. When power had to be exercised, he would do so — for without underlying power, the meekness and gentleness would be fraudulent.

The *English* word 'gentle', we conclude (and leaving aside its biblical overtones), once expressed not merely softness of touch, but a whole vision of human character and human relations, involving those quali-

ties which still in Wesley's day characterized a man of culture and breeding, a *gentle*-man.

There is no doubt that Charles Wesley looked upon gentleness as above all a characteristic of the Son of God, suffering for us men and for our salvation. He does not, however, use the term 'gentle' very often in his hymns, and then only in simple hymns, of which we may quote just two other examples. One apostrophizes the suffering Saviour:

O Thou gentler Lamb of God,
Hear thy ransom'd Follower pray,
Wash me in thy cleansing Blood,
Bear my Inbred Sin away;¹²

The other contrasts the character of the Saviour and that of the inadequate disciple:

Gentle Thou, and meek in Heart,
All Humility Thou art;
Full of Wrath, and Pride I am,
How unlike my lowly Lamb!¹³

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Otherwise, the conjunction of 'gentle' and 'meek' in the first line of this verse is precisely that of 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild'.

II. MILD

Untypically for Wesley, 'mild' is not a Biblical term, and one might perhaps be forgiven for supposing (as J. B. Phillips supposes) that it was used by Wesley in this instance mainly because it provided a convenient rhyme for 'child'. But it must be remembered that in another well-known hymn Wesley used this word twice to express a kenotic Christology. The verse in question is that of the well-known Christmas hymn, celebrating the Incarnation, 'Hark! the herald-angels sing . . .'

- 1a Hark, the herald-angels sing
Glory to the new-born King,
"Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled."¹⁴
- 3a Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.¹⁵

¹² C. Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (2nd ed. 1756), Vol. II, Hymn CIV, v.1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Hymn CXIV, v.3.

¹⁴ *Wesley's Hymns*, no. 602 (original punctuation).

¹⁵ *Methodist Hymn Book*, no. 117.

In verse one, the original inverted commas are important, since they indicate that this is an interpretative paraphrase of the hymn of praise sung by the angels: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.' The words 'mercy mild' correspond therefore in intention to the expression in the AV (Lk. 2:14) 'good will toward men' (ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκία) — that act and attitude of God by which the mystery of the Incarnation was accomplished. Similarly, the line 'Mild He lays His glory by' immediately suggests, and paraphrases, Phil. 2:7, in which Paul says that Jesus ' . . . made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.' The associations of the word, therefore, are directly incarnational. Divine love and divine condescension are meant, not pathetic human weakness.

III. MEEK

If 'gentle' and 'mild' do not occur very often in the Bible, the word 'meek' is relatively common, and it is surprising to find well-meaning preachers so readily assuming that Wesley was using the word in its debased modern sense — an error anticipated, incidentally, in Cruden's Concordance, which points out (evidently not unnecessarily) that it is 'not used in the Bible in the bad sense of tamely submissive and servile'.

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The frequency of the use of the word in the Bible (to which I shall return in a moment) is reflected time and time again in Charles Wesley's hymns. Here it is out of the question to quote more than a representative selection of verses. These fall into two general categories. In the first, Wesley is marvelling at the readiness with which the Son of God accepted the necessity of suffering. In the second, he is urging Christians to adopt the same attitude of willing acceptance in the face of persecution (a situation with which the early Methodists, alas, were all too familiar).

Did Christ, asks Wesley, rant and rage in the face of his sufferings?

How did the Lamb his Wrongs endure?
Clam'rous, and warm? Or meek, and dumb?¹⁶

The answer, to anyone who knows the Scriptures, is given as soon as asked. For the sake of his mission, he submitted to suffering.

Put up, He cries, thy needless Sword,
Nor stain the Meekness of thy Lord.¹⁷

¹⁶ Wesley, *HSP II*, Hymn I, v. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Hymn I, v. 7.

This reflects Jesus' arrest, of course, as recorded in Matt. 26, and particularly verse 52. Matt. 27:30 is recalled in a further hymn-verse:

Still let me on my Pattern gaze,
How meek and motionless He stands!
They spit upon His sacred Face,
They buffet with unhallowed Hands.¹⁸

Here, and in very many more verses, the 'meekness' of Christ in his sufferings are held out to the Christian as a pattern to be copied. 'Thou didst the meek Example leave,/That I might in thy Footsteps tread, . . .'¹⁹ The Christian should 'pursue' his 'patient Lord' against 'The utmost Rage of Earth or Hell': 'Meek, as the Lamb of God endure,/And die to make my Calling sure.'²⁰ God is prayed to

Bestow the patient Power,
The Meekness of my injur'd Lamb,
And arm me for the fiery Hour
Of Suffering for thy Name.²¹

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The meekness of Christ is a support in time of temptation ('Meek, patient Son of God and Man,/With us in our Temptation stay;', LXXI:1), and an example as death approaches ('Then let me with Meekness attend/The Word that shall summon me home,' XXI:5). But there is the assurance, too, that

The Modest and Meek This Earth shall possess,
The Kingdom who seek Of Jesus' Grace,
That Power of his Spirit Shall joyfully own,
And all Things inherit in virtue of One.²²

The first Christians lived in this way, as 'Meek, simple Followers of the Lamb'.²³

It ought, perhaps, to be superfluous to point out that each of these lines echoes directly, often *verbatim*, the words of the Authorized Version, as an hour spent with Cruden amply demonstrates. And reference to, say, Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*²⁴ simply amplifies the point, first, that 'meek' and 'meekness' are words referring

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Hymn V, v.1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Hymn VI, v.4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Hymn XI, v.7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Hymn XLIII, v.1.

²² *Ibid.*, Hymn CLXXVIII, v.3.

²³ *Ibid.*, Hymn CCXLVI, v.2.

²⁴ G. Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. VI (1968), 645ff.; cf. G. A. Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962); 334f.

directly to Christ, and secondly, that the same characteristics are expected of Christians.

The words *πραῦς* and *πραῦτης* are consistently translated in the AV as 'meek' and 'meekness', though both English words have since been abandoned by inconsistent translators, the NEB as a rule preferring 'gentle' to 'meek' and 'gentleness' to 'meekness'. These words, together with the adverb *πρῶως* ('meekly' in AV), all have a long history in Greek literature; and all imply positive (though not necessarily Stoic) acceptance of unpleasantness, the suppression of passions, the control of powers. A tamed animal — for instance a horse — could be described in these terms; so too is 'the gentleness of leading citizens'; while for Aristotle, *πραῦτης* is 'the laudable mean between the extremes of anger and indifference'.²⁵

Of the uses of these words in the NT, it will perhaps suffice to quote one or two well-known passages. Among the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are the meek (*οἱ πραεῖς*): for they shall inherit the earth' (Matt. 5:5). In Christ's teachings: '. . . for I am meek (*ὅτι πραῦς εἰμι*) and lowly in heart' (Matt. 11:29). At the entry of Christ into Jerusalem, the King comes 'meek (*πραῦς*) and sitting upon an ass' (Matt. 21:5). The quality of 'meekness' is mentioned *inter alia* in 1 Cor. 4:21, Gal. 5:23, 6:1, Eph. 4:2, Col. 3:12. And — perhaps most important in this present context — in 2 Cor. 10:1, 'Now I Paul myself beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ . . .' Almost certainly this is the verse which Charles Wesley principally had in mind when writing 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild'.^{25a}

It is on the other hand unlikely that Charles Wesley was thinking in specifically baptismal terms in this connection, though as Edvin Larsson has shown in his important study *Christus als Vorbild* (1962), *πραῦτης* (meekness) was one of the Christian virtues impressed upon candidates for baptism. In Col. 3:12 the neophyte is urged to 'Put on, . . . as the elect of God . . . meekness', *i.e.* to imitate Christ in this and other respects.²⁶

²⁵ TDNT, *loc. cit.*

^{25a} Wesley in fact uses the same triad of terms in another of his children's hymns, though on this occasion referring to the qualities of the disciple, rather than the Master. The first verse of Hymn LXXIV (*Works*, VI, 443) reads:

Lamb of God, I fain would be
A meek follower of Thee;
Gentle, tractable, and mild,
Loving as a little child:

²⁶ E. Larsson, *Christus als Vorbild* (1962), 217: '. . . wenn die Getauften aufgefordert werden, sich in Sanftmut (meekness) zu kleiden, so werden sie damit ermahnt, Christus nachzueifern.'

We may perhaps now begin to sum up. We have seen that Charles Wesley's hymn-writing was profoundly and consistently biblical, and that the two hymns which have been combined to form 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' are teeming with scriptural references and allusions. The terms 'gentle' and 'meek' are directly biblical, both referring to that incomparable quality of willing suffering which Christ showed in his sufferings and death; both reflect what is technically called a kenotic Christology, the act of self-emptying by which Christ became man, and 'for us men and for our salvation' suffered, was mocked, and died. 'Mild', though not actually a biblical term (at least not in the Authorized Version) is also incarnational, having especial reference to the mystery of the Incarnation. None of these words, in the sense in which Wesley used them, can be justly described as 'weak'; on the contrary, they could hardly be stronger. And the disrepute into which Wesley's wonderful hymn has fallen can be ascribed directly to that process of linguistic degeneration which has taken place since Wesley's day. Wesley himself would have been horrified, and probably saddened, to find what had become of his verses in the popular mind since his day. But for this unfortunate development, we should blame, not Wesley himself, but modern linguistic flaccidity.

I hope at the very least that this study will have done something to prevent further misuse of 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' as a blunt instrument wherewith to belabour the heads of Liberal Protestants. It is always a pity to see a good sermon illustration dissolve into illusion and insubstantiality, but it really must be abandoned. Perhaps the hymn itself may never quite recover from its marshmallow image; but let the aspiring preacher at least reflect that Charles Wesley was no Liberal Protestant. And that the same man who wrote 'Gentle Jesus' wrote these words — and with them I end:

Jesu's tremendous Name
Puts all our Foes to flight!
Jesus the meek, the Angry Lamb
A Lion is in Fight:
By all Hell's Host withstood,
We all Hell's Host o'erthrow,
And conquering them thro' Jesu's Blood,
We still to conquer go.