

## Can a hymn be great poetry?

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Friday, 19 October 2007  
Last Updated Friday, 19 October 2007

According to Samuel Johnson, hymns cannot be poetry of any calibre. For him there is an irreconcilable conflict between the &ldquo;essence&rdquo; of poetry which is invention (&ldquo;something unexpected [which] surprises and delights&rdquo; ) and the &ldquo;paucity&rdquo; of religious devotional topics which &ldquo;enforces perpetual repetition&rdquo; and &ldquo;rejects ornaments of figurative diction&rdquo;. He allows the best hymnists only that they have &ldquo;done better than others what no man has done well&rdquo;. Understandably, hymn-lovers respond to this with an indignant cry that Johnson is guilty of a basic category error.

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