

Brightest and Best

Reginald Heber, Lyrics, 1811; Jean Ritchie, Music

From the Singing of Appalachian Shape Note Hymn "*Star of the East*"

The words to this hymn were written in 1811 by an English rector and bishop named Reginald Heber. He originally wrote it as a hymn for the Feast of Epiphany. It was first published in the *Christian Observer* in 1811, but did not appear in hymnals until after Heber's death.

The lyrics of "*Brightest and Best*" have been paired with at least six different musical compositions. An early composition by Joseph F. Thrupp was published in 1853 in "*Psalms and Hymns for Public*".

Some 80 years later, in 1892, James P. Harding wrote a melody called, "*Morning Star*", and paired it with Heber's words. Harding was the organist for St. Andrew's Church in London and wrote the for use at the Gifford Hall Mission. "*Morning Star*" is still the tune most commonly associated with "*Brightest and Best*" in Europe.

Across the Atlantic, the song was also popular in America. Paired with a different tune named, "*Star of the East*", this version first appeared anonymously in an 1835 issue of the publication the "*Southern Harmony Shape Note*" hymnal. The melody presented here comes from the singing of the "first lady of the dulcimer world", Jean Ritchie, who wrote about her childhood memory of learning this melody from her grandmother. She transcribed the music in her book "*Singing Family of the Cumberlands*". She first recorded this hymn on her recording, "*Carols for All Seasons*", and later on, "*Kentucky Christmas Old and New*".



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