

# Word of God

## A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*

503

This hymn may have been written about, sung, and translated as much or more than any other hymn in the church's history. Robin Leaver gives a glimpse at the literature about it.<sup>675</sup> It appears in almost all hymnals, and for the last four and a half centuries it has been and still is regularly sung by worshipping congregations of more and more traditions. As to translations, a century ago James Mearns listed two pages of English ones in Julian's tiny typeface;<sup>676</sup> Harry Eskew said that before 1900 over eighty translations had been made in fifty-three languages;<sup>677</sup> and Leaver estimated that near the end of the twentieth century the hymn was sung in over two hundred languages and that close to one hundred English translations of it had been made.<sup>678</sup>

All attempts to isolate precisely when Martin Luther (#263) wrote it have failed, but it was probably in the late 1520s. No copies remain of the first edition of Joseph Klug's *Geistliche Lieder* (Wittenberg, 1529), where it was almost certainly printed. It is in the second edition of 1533 (with the tune), of which a copy remains. An Augsburg broadsheet of the hymn from 1529 with the complete text (no tune) is also extant. That was "probably a reprint of an earlier Wittenberg broadsheet,"<sup>679</sup> now lost. Though in our period and from the nineteenth century onward the hymn has often been regarded as a militant battle cry, as Leaver points out "the title on the broadsheet is revealing: 'A Hymn of Comfort.'"<sup>680</sup> That seems to be how Luther and his colleagues regarded it. He based it on Psalm 46. While keeping the psalms in their original versions with psalm tones, he also wanted free metrical versions with hymn tunes. This was a psalm he formed into such a metrical version, calling for those more able than he to work out other ones.

The above and related information is readily available. Leaver in his article in *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, noted above, gives a good entrée to it. What we need here is a history of this hymn's English translations among Lutherans in the United States, to see how we arrived at the versions in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. This

675 Robin A. Leaver, "A mighty fortress is our God," *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, vol. 3B (1994), 1280–1281, footnotes.

676 James Mearns, "Ein feste Burg," Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology* (1907), 324–325.

677 Harry Eskew, "A mighty fortress is our God," in McElrath, *Handbook to the Baptist Hymnal* (1992), 81.

678 Leaver, "A mighty fortress is our God," 1280.

679 *Ibid.*, 1275.

680 *Ibid.*, 1276.

is complicated. Multiple versions relate to one another with variations that would require a long form-critical study to ferret out in detail. In broad outline the story goes something like this.

In 1863 William M. Reynolds (#263) wrote a seminal article for *The Evangelical Quarterly Review* in which he discussed English translations of “Ein feste Burg”<sup>681</sup> and provided two of them himself (“A Literal Version” and “A Variation”).<sup>682</sup> He traced the probable first complete English translation back to *Psalmodia Germanica* (1760–1765) and noted that the New York Lutheran pastor Johann Christoph Kunze had included it in his short-lived hymnal of 1795<sup>683</sup> with its “defective meter” and language not suited for congregational use.<sup>684</sup> Reynolds was happier with Thomas Carlyle’s translation from an article of 1831 that lauded Luther,<sup>685</sup> the same translation James Mearns in Julian’s *Dictionary* called “the most forcible and faithful of all the English versions.”<sup>686</sup> That version, “A safe stronghold our God is still,” was the basis, with alterations, of hymn #964 [Reynolds mistakenly says #966] in editions of *Hymns Selected and Original* after 1850.<sup>687</sup> Reynolds noted that, although this version was the best English one to date, the adaptations there had not resulted in “a very smooth or homogeneous version.”<sup>688</sup>

*Hymns Selected and Original* was the hymnal of the General Synod. It was first published in 1828 by a committee chaired by Samuel S. Schmucker (1799–1873), who was a major force behind “American Lutheranism.” Beale M. Schmucker (1827–1888) opposed his father, took a more confessional, sacramental, and liturgical stance, and provided the scholarly work for the committee that prepared the Liturgy of 1860. He was also on the committee for another hymnal. He sought help from an extraordinary hymnologist, Frederic M. Bird (1838–1908), who in 1865 wrote three articles on “Lutheran Hymnology” in *The Evangelical Quarterly Review*. They sketched out the program for *Hymns for the Use of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, which appeared the same year. With revisions it joined the Liturgy of 1860 to form the *Church Book for the use of Evangelical Lutheran Congregations* of 1868.

“Ein feste Burg” appeared in both *Hymns for the Use of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* and the *Church Book*. In 1865 (*Hymns*) it began like the version in *Hymns Selected and Original*, “A safe stronghold our God is still,” but the second line was changed to “trusty Shield and Weapon,” following Catherine Winkworth’s version

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681 W. M. Reynolds, “Luther’s Battle-Song of the Reformation,” *The Evangelical Quarterly Review* XIV:LVI (July 1863): 535–558.

682 *Ibid.*, 557–558.

683 Johann Christoph Kunze, *A Hymn and Prayer-Book for the Use of Such Churches as Use the English Language* (1795), #96. This hymnal was one of three English hymnals from New York by Lutheran pastors at the turn of century (George Strebach and Ralph Williston were the other two), which had little traction.

684 Reynolds, “Luther’s Battle-Song of the Reformation,” 547.

685 He cited it from Carlyle’s *Heroes and Hero Worship* of 1838, but Carlyle had published it in 1831 in Thomas Carlyle, “Luther’s Psalm [1831],” *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays in Five Volumes*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), 160–163.

686 Mearns, “Ein feste Burg,” 324.

687 This book in its 1850 revision was in some editions titled *Hymns Original and Selected*.

688 Reynolds, “Luther’s Battle-Song of the Reformation,” 549.

in *Lyra Germanica*, first series (1855). Reynolds's version, though altered, was an even stronger influence, with what might be called his signature line in stanza 3, "Scowl fierce as he will" (though that was not totally original with him<sup>689</sup>). In 1868 (the *Church Book*) further alterations were made, still with Carlyle's underlay, Reynolds's strong influence, Winkworth's second line ("trusty Shield"), but now Frederic H. Hedge's (see #505) first line, "A mighty fortress is our God." It should be noted that editing of this hymn moved across party lines, from the "American Lutheran" book to the more confessional one.

The version from the *Church Book* served as the basis for German and Swedish Lutherans in the United States through the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn Book* (1889), the *Common Service Book* (1917), *The Hymnal and Order of Service Authorized by the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod* (1925), *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941), *Christian Worship* (1993), and the *Lutheran Service Book* (2006). The American Lutheran Church was an exception in its *American Lutheran Hymnal* (1930) in that it printed both the *Church Book* version and one—not without the *Church Book* influence—that was by Paul E. Kretzmann. It began, "A mighty fortress is our Lord / A sure defense to save us!" Danes in their *Hymnal for Church and Home* (1927) chose the version by Kretzmann. Norwegians in *The Lutheran Hymnary* (1913) and the ("old") *Concordia* (1916) used a translation that began like the one the Germans and Swedes used, "A mighty fortress is our God, / A trusty shield and weapon," but after that it is an altered version from *The Presbyterian Book of Praise* of 1897 from Canada.<sup>690</sup> (The Canadian Presbyterians themselves retained Carlyle's first line, "A safe stronghold our God is still.")

The *Service Book and Hymnal* (1958) broke from the *Church Book* and chose the version with the most ecumenical consensus, the one by Frederic H. Hedge (see #505). For *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), which *Lutheran Worship* (1982) also basically followed, the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship made a new translation. The Carlyle/Reynolds version from the *Church Book* stands behind it, with "in fierce war engage," however, rather than "Scowl fierce as he will." *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* followed *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Through this continual sifting and editing we come to the text we now have—which points to the difficulty of translation, particularly of this hymn, and how editors have struggled with the versions of the texts they print.

## EIN FESTE BURG

This is the rhythmic form of the tune that, with one minor alteration (the first note at "he arms" was a half note), is the first printed version we have. It comes

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689 Dulcken had used "scowl" in 1856, as he indicated: Reynolds, "Luther's Battle-Song of the Reformation," 554.

690 *The Presbyterian Book of Praise Approved and Commended by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada with Tunes* (London: Oxford, 1897), #259.

from *Kirchengesänge, mit vil schönen Psalmen and Melodey, gantz geendert und gemert* (Nürnberg, 1531).<sup>691</sup> The rhythmic forms of the chorales were gradually lost after the Reformation (see #504), rediscovered in the nineteenth century as a Lutheran confessional symbol, and in the twentieth century have found their way into other traditions. In rounded bar form, this chorale in its rhythmic version dances and gives the text the flexible comfort Luther and his colleagues perceived.

This tune has been viewed as based on any number of sources, some more plausible than others: chant, a French chanson, a Psalter psalm tune, and Hans Sachs's "Silberweise."<sup>692</sup> Friedrich Blume sketched a broader scope by seeing it and VOM HIMMEL HOCH (#268) as part of a very old melody type that reaches "back to the early period of Eurasian population migrations."<sup>693</sup> Its characteristics include "a descending melodic idea within the span of an octave," a strongly major orientation, the importance of the dominant, and "an emphatic rhythm at the beginning."<sup>694</sup> The elusive though sometimes plausible character of particular sources, along with the broader scope Blume defines, combine to point to this conclusion: Luther wrote the tune with his unique gift to harness the musical milieu he inhabited not for soloistic or individual purposes, but for participation by a congregational assembly. He is not the only one who has done this, but his skill at it was unsurpassed. (P.S.: Though in bar form, the tune did not come from a bar [tavern], nor was it in the possession of the devil before Luther wrote it.)

## A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*

504

This is the same text as #503 except that a syllable has been added at the three lines of 5 to make three lines of 6. The change is made to fit this version of the tune, which requires a syllabic setting.

### EIN FESTE BURG

The form of the melody that appears here is an isometric version that comes from two centuries after the Reformation, Johann König's (#811) *Harmonischer Liederschatz* (1738). The original rhythmic forms of both German Lutheran chorales and Calvinist Genevan psalm tunes gradually got slower and eventually turned into a series of equal notes. One can see the progression by looking at the four examples

691 Given in Zahn, *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder* (1889–1893), #7377a.

692 For a good summary see Leaver, "A mighty fortress is our God," 1282–1286.

693 Blume, "The Period of the Reformation," *Protestant Church Music* (1974), 38.

694 Ibid.

Zahn gives of this tune, from 1535, 1616, 1715, and 1738, the last of which is basically the version here at #504.<sup>695</sup> Though this version can have grace and stately dignity, when allied to nineteenth-century rhetoric and big musical treatments the temptation is to overstate it. Notes then get lined up in rows like soldiers, and militaristic images are overlaid on this hymn.

## A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

505

This translation by **Frederic H. Hedge** (December 12, 1805–August 21, 1890) is the one most commonly used in North American hymnals<sup>696</sup> and the one the *Service Book and Hymnal* (1958) chose. It was first published in W.H. Furness’s *Gems of German Verse* (Philadelphia, 1852) and *Hymns for the Church of Christ* (Boston, 1853), which Hedge edited with Frederick Huntington. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* prints a version with the language updated. It fits the meter of the tune’s version at #504.

Hedge was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, studied in Germany between the ages of twelve and sixteen, graduated from Harvard in 1825, and then studied theology for the next four years. In 1829 he became a Unitarian minister, ordained in the West Cambridge Church. He served churches in Maine, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. From 1857 to 1876 he taught church history at Harvard Divinity School and from 1872 to 1884 German literature at Harvard. In addition to being a German scholar, he was a transcendentalist who founded the Transcendental Club (though he differed with it later) and was a friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He wrote a book on Christian liturgy, published the same year as *Hymns for the Church of Christ*. He is best known today for his translation of Luther’s hymn. He was married to Lucy L. Pierce; they had three children.

## The Word of God Is Source and Seed

506

Delores Dufner (#307) wrote this hymn in 1983. She used Ezekiel 37:1-14, Mark 4:3-20, John 1:1-18, and 1 John 1:1-4 as sources. Her descriptions of its themes plot the progression: “God’s Word is like seed; God’s Word is powerful and life-giving; God’s Word was made flesh in Jesus.”<sup>697</sup> She says that for her “one of the greatest gifts of Vatican II was the ‘opening up’ of scripture. Hearing chapter 37 of Ezekiel

695 Zahn, *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder* (1889–1893), #7377a–#7377d.

696 Without making an exhaustive check, I quickly assembled a stack of fifteen hymnals from other than Lutheran traditions that use it.

697 Dufner, *The Glimmer of Glory in Song* (2003), 158.