



Translating Paul Gerhardt's Hymns

FREDERICK J. GAISER

To commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Paul Gerhardt, the great Lutheran hymn writer (1607–1676), *Word & World* will offer in each of its four 2007 issues a new translation of one of Gerhardt's hymns.

The recent complete edition of Paul Gerhardt's works contains 139 German hymns and poems and fifteen poems in Latin.¹ Of the German poems, 124 indicate an associated melody and thus were certainly sung as hymns. The other fifteen were poems for a variety of occasions, including weddings and funerals.

As of 1918, Theodore Brown Hewitt found English translations of eighty-three of the 124 German hymns.² Apparently little has changed.³ It is not surpris-

¹Paul Gerhardt, *Wach auf, mein Herz, und singe: Vollständige Ausgabe seiner Lieder und Gedichte*, ed. Eberhard von Cranach-Sichart (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 2004).

²Theodore Brown Hewitt, *Paul Gerhardt as a Hymn Writer and His Influence on English Hymnody* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918) 167–169. There are several 1976 reprint editions of this volume, but the basic text remains unchanged.

³I have not found translations of any of the other hymns with the exception of my own English rendition of Gerhardt's paraphrase of Psalm 91, "Wer unterm Schirm des Höchsten sitzt" ("When Sheltered by Our God Most High"), in *Word & World* 25/2 (2005) 200–202. However, *Christian Worship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993) does offer an updated translation of the final stanza of "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth" as a separate hymn with a new tune: "Lord, When Your Glory I Shall See," hymn 219 (the tune is WEDDING GLORY, by Kurt J. Eggert). Both tune and text are a welcome addition, since the final stanza rarely appears in recent English hymnals; an exception is *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941) at hymn 142. Online, Gesangbuch.org catalogues the hymnody of the Reformation in German and English. There, too, translations are listed for no Gerhardt hymns beyond the eighty-three noted by Hewitt.

Some forty-one of Paul Gerhardt's hymns remain untranslated into English, including many biblical paraphrases that bring a great gift to the Christian community. Word & World will offer translations of some of these hymns in its 2007 issues.

ing, perhaps, that translators have shied away from the twenty-nine-stanza version of the Passion History (“O Mensch, beweine deine Sünd”)⁴ or the thirty-six-stanza narrative of the Easter story (“Nun freut euch hier und überall”),⁵ but many other treasures for an English-speaking audience remain yet to be mined from Gerhardt’s work.

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Of particular interest to me as a teacher of Bible are Gerhardt’s hymns based on biblical texts. Not surprisingly, the hymns in general are replete with biblical images, and many of them are poetic expansions of a particular verse or section of Scripture.⁶ In addition, however, we find thirty-six more or less direct paraphrases of lengthier biblical texts (mostly psalms). These remain disproportionately untranslated. According to my count, sixteen such paraphrases have been translated and twenty have not.⁷ Strikingly, Gerhardt overwhelmingly allows the Old Testament passages among this group to retain their own voice, rarely making an explicitly Christian reference. Nor does he end his psalm paraphrases with a trinitarian doxology in order to mark their use in Christian worship. None of this is necessary, apparently, because of Gerhardt’s obvious assumption that he is working here with Christian Scripture, addressed to him and those who sing and hear his hymns. One hears this, for example, in the frequent description of the psalmists’ troubles as their “cross”⁸ or when Gerhardt turns God’s “faithful” (Ps 85:8) into “Christians.”⁹ The paraphrase of Ps 73, somewhat less direct than most, begins by calling upon the “Christian soul” to be of good spirit.¹⁰ Still, what remains remarkable in the Old Testament paraphrases is the paucity of explicit Christian references. This does not at all call into question what Paul Westermeyer has called the “christocentric essence” of Gerhardt’s hymnody,¹¹ for the God of whom the psalms speak is known to Gerhardt only as the Father of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, his is no

⁴Gerhardt, *Wach auf*, 63–73.

⁵Ibid., 102–109.

⁶Perhaps the best-known example is “If God My Lord Be for Me,” based on Rom 8:31 (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006] #788).

⁷Translated paraphrases include Mic 7; Sir 23; Rev 7; and Pss 1; 13; 23; 25; 90; 91 (see note 3, above); 112; 119; 121; 139; 143; 145; 146. Remaining untranslated are Deut 32; Isa 52–53; Hos 6; 11; Pss 13 (a second version); 27; 30; 34; 39; 42; 49; 52; 62; 71; 73; 85; 111; 116; Prov 31; and Sir 51.

⁸For example, in stanza 6 of “Ich will mit Danken kommen” (Ps 111) or stanza 6 of “Ich bin ein Gast auf Erden” (Ps 119); see Gerhardt, *Wach auf*, 310, 361.

⁹Stanza 5 of “Herr, der du vormals hast dein Land” (Ps 85), in *ibid.*, 214.

¹⁰“Sei wohlgemut, o Christenseel,” in *ibid.*, 265.

¹¹Paul Westermeyer, “Paul Gerhardt: Who He Was and Why We Care,” *Word & World* 27/1 (2007) 69–72. I am grateful to my colleague Professor Westermeyer for his many helpful comments and suggestions in this Gerhardt translation project.

ahistorical reading of the Old Testament, for, as we have seen, he lets the texts speak as they originally did; still, as his poems make clear, he understands that the Old Testament texts, by pointing faithfully to God, point faithfully to Christ. They require no emendation to make this happen.¹²

Especially these Old Testament paraphrases bring a great gift to the Christian community, providing access to many significant biblical texts in a way that preserves their original sense while, at the same time, naturally proclaiming what Gerhardt understands to be an essential Old Testament witness to the Christian gospel. Thus, one of these, “Was soll ich doch, o Ephraim,” based on Hos 11, has been chosen for translation in this issue of *Word & World*.

In his final words to his sole surviving son, Paul Friedrich (words particularly appropriate for the theme of this issue of *Word & World*: “Living Forgiveness”), Gerhardt advises the young man:

If you find yourself inflamed with anger, stand stock still and say not one word until you have seriously prayed the Ten Commandments and the Creed [*den christlichen Glauben*]....Do good to all, whether or not they repay you, for what humans cannot repay, the Creator of heaven and earth has long since taken care of, in that he has created you, given you his dear Son, and taken and accepted you as his child and heir in Holy Baptism....In sum, pray diligently, study something honest, live peaceably, serve well, and remain firm in your faith and confession, so that you too might one day die and depart this earth willingly, joyfully, and blessedly. Amen.¹³

This is good counsel for us as well, and the hymns of Paul Gerhardt will help us live such a Christian life.

PAUL GERHARDT, “HOW CAN I GIVE YOU UP, MY CHILD?”

“Living Forgiveness” is the theme of this issue of *Word & World*, and few biblical texts fit that theme as well as Hos 11, which serves as the basis for Paul Gerhardt’s hymn “Was soll ich doch, o Ephraim.”

Hosea provides us with access to the very heart of God as God wrestles with his response to a recalcitrant child. “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?” wonders God earlier. “Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early” (Hos 6:4). This rebellion has triggered God’s punishment and will continue to do so. But things cannot be allowed to end here—not because of Ephraim’s character, but because of God’s. “When Israel was a child, I loved him,” remembers God (Hos 11:1). “I...taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms” (v. 3); so “How can I give you up, Ephraim?” asks God through the prophet (Hos 11:8)—and Gerhardt asks the same question in his hymn. Finally God cannot, pre-

¹²Something of an exception is the apparently untranslated paraphrase of Isa 52:13–53:12 (“Siehe, mein getreuter Knecht”) in which Gerhardt introduces the suffering servant as God’s Son who suffers on the cross as a martyr (Gerhardt, *Wach auf*, 73). Even there, however, the rest of the hymn rarely strays from its careful adherence to the original biblical text.

¹³“Das Testament Paul Gerhardts,” in Gerhardt, *Wach auf*, 390–391 (my translation).

cisely because “I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath” (v. 9). For Hosea, God’s holiness is God’s mercy, and it will not allow God’s destruction of God’s own child. This alone gives Israel the possibility to “live forgiven.” Earlier, Hosea might have left the impression of a God who punishes Israel in order to bring it to its senses so that it can again find God’s love; but, of course, there is no end to that vicious cycle. The beloved falls away, the lover punishes, the beloved returns, the lover loves, the beloved falls away, the lover punishes.... God apparently wants out of this even more than Israel. So God breaks the cycle, as only God can. I will not wait for their return, says God, I will turn to them: “My heart recoils” (11:8); “my anger has turned” (14:4). “I will heal their disloyalty,” says God; “I will love them freely” (14:4). To demand their loyalty has proven fruitless, so God chooses to love them freely, and it is only this free love that can heal Israel’s disloyalty—and ours. Return to God is not demanded, it is given—this now is the meaning of forgiveness for Hosea. Everything is made new.

“Return to God is not demanded, it is given—this now is the meaning of forgiveness for Hosea. Everything is made new.”

For Gerhardt, it is this profound love that will take God to the cross, a lamb dying for the sake of his own foes (stanza 5). If only briefly, Gerhardt makes the connection between God’s love to Israel and God’s love in Christ.

In the text, we hear God’s own voice as it is mediated to us through the prophet. This is God’s word, written in Holy Scripture and coming to us to bring new life. In the hymn, curiously, this voice of God is taken up into the congregation’s song. It is a risky move, made necessary, of course, by the text itself, if Gerhardt is to paraphrase it faithfully. Now the congregation takes on the prophetic role, mediating God’s word as did Hosea. The congregation speaks for God, but, since it is not God, it speaks first to itself and then to the neighbor and the world. The first five stanzas of the hymn function as proclamation, as sermon on Hos 11, for all to hear (including the singers). In the final stanza the voice changes, and the congregation speaks to God in prayer and praise. This is the more typical direction of a hymn. Having heard itself sing, the congregation addresses this “holy God, eternal Lord, forgiving my transgression” and prays for true repentance and renewal. It is a bold hymn—as bold as Hosea’s original message.

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PAUL GERHARDT, "HOW CAN I GIVE YOU UP, MY CHILD?" (from Hosea 11)

Tune: AN WASSERFLÜSSEN BABYLON (87 87 887 887)

(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #340)

1

"How can I give you up, my child?
O Ephraim, how leave you?
From my fierce rage, you turned and smiled,
Quite sure no harm would find you.
And now shall I come to protect
You Israel, when you stand stiff-necked?
Shall I still be your bulwark,
Though since your youth you've spurned my word,
Rejecting ev'ry warning heard,
Your sins your prideful landmark?

2

"Should I not imitate your life
And learn from your instruction?
Then I would pay your sin and strife
With Sodom's stark destruction.
Should I not pour out all my wrath
As you traverse your cursed path
To Admah's downfall dismal,
Since you have strayed, near worse than they,
From my command, my promised way,
Toward your dead end abysmal?

3

"I should, no doubt, let you descend
Into distress and sorrow,
But I cannot my ardor bend
And rob you of tomorrow.
My heart recoils from treating you
To that reward that is your due;
It burns with grace and favor.
I pine for you, my heart's desire,
Will not permit hell's blazing fire
Your soul at last to savor.

1

Was soll ich doch, o Ephraim,
Was soll ich aus dir machen?
Der du so oftmals meinen Grimm
Hast pflegen zu verlachen?
Soll ich dich schützen, Israel?
Soll ich dir deine frohe Seel
Hinfürder noch bewahren?
Aus welcher doch von Jugend auf
Ein solcher großer Sündenhauf
Ohn alle Scheu gefahren.

2

Sollt ich nicht billig deiner Tat
Und Leben gleich mich stellen?
Und dich wie Sodom ohne Gnad
Und wie Adama fallen?
Sollt ich nicht billig meine Glut
Auf dein verfluchtes Gut und Blut
Wie auf Zeboim schütten?
Dieweil du ja mein Wort and Bahn
Fast ärger noch, als sie getan,
Bis hieher überschritten.

3

Ja, billig sollt ich dich dahin
In alles Herzleid senken,
Allein es will mir nicht zu Sinn,
Ich hab ein andres Denken;
Mein Herze will durchaus nicht dran,
Daß es dir tu, wie du getan,
Es brennt für Gnad und Liebe;
Mich jammert dein von Herzen sehr
Und kann nicht sehen, daß das Heer
Der Höllen dich betrübe.

4

"I will not give what you deserve,
Destroying without measure;
Compassion yours, without reserve,
Your death gives me no pleasure.
For I am God, your faithful Lord,
Not one of that ungrateful horde
Of Adam's wicked offspring,
Who, faithless, can no love bestow,
Returning blows for every blow,
More sinful daily growing.

4

Ich kann und mag nicht, wie du wohl
Verdienet, dich verderben;
Ich bin und bleib Erbarmens voll
Und halte nichts vom Sterben;
Denn ich bin Gott, der treue Gott,
Mitnichten einer aus der Rott
Der bösen Adamskinder,
Die ohne Treu und Glauben seind
Und werden ihren Feinden feind
Und täglich größere Sünder.

5

"No mortal I, in this persist,
And mark it well, my servant;
The Holy One within your midst,
Who comes with love most fervent:
For you, my foes, I go to death,
A lamb, expending my last breath
In love that falters never.
I'll carry you, your burden bear,
That heavy yoke must I now wear,
So you can live forever."

5

So bin ich nicht, das glaube mir,
Und nimms recht zu Gemüte,
Ich bin der Heilge unter dir,
Der ich aus lauter Güte
Für meine Feinde in den Tod
Und in des bittern Kreuzes Not
Mich als ein Lamm begeben;
Ich, ich will tragen deine Last,
Die du dir, Mensch, gehäufet hast,
Auf daß du mögest leben.

6

O holy God, eternal Lord,
Forgiving my transgression.
Renew my spirit through your word,
Make me your own possession.
Awaken my repentance true,
That I may bind myself to you
In faith and trust unending.
Now, through your death, may I, too, die
To every hateful sin and lie
That has your heart been rending.

6

O heilger Herr, o ewges Heil,
Versöhner meiner Sünden,
Ach, heilge mich und laß mich teil
In, bei und an dir finden!
Erwecke mich zur wahren Reu
Und gib, daß ich dein edle Treu
Im festen Glauben fasse;
Auch töte mich durch deinen Tod,
Damit ich allen Sündenkot
Hinfort von Herzen hasse.

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Text from Paul Gerhardt, *Wach auf, mein Herz, und singe: Vollständige Ausgabe seiner Lieder und Gedichte*, ed. Eberhard von Cranach-Sichart (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 2004) 207–209. (Note that in stanza 4, the new edition of *Wach auf* contains a typographical error, reading "größte Sünder," instead of "größre Sünder" with the 1949 edition of *Wach auf* and other German versions.)