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Our Treasury of Medieval Hymns

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Lutherans can be proud of their hymnody, from Martin Luther to the present, and yet should also recognize the prior legacy. After all, Luther himself appreciated, adopted, and wisely adapted many medieval songs and chants. It is true that until 1524 there were no hymnals in the usual sense of songbooks for lay use in public worship and at home,[1] except for the slim precedent among the Prague followers of Jan Hus. But there certainly were hymns, in several forms, and dozens of these medieval texts are still sung today. Just as such hymns

[1] See the new collection of essays edited by Robin A. Leaver, *A New Song We Now Begin: Celebrating the Half Millennium of Lutheran Hymnals 1524–2024* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024).

> *Hymnody did not just spring from the ground in 1524 – the Bible speaks of the first Christians expressing their faith in song. Luther and many others have drawn on an immense legacy that stretched back into the early church. Protestants over the centuries have rescued many of these hymns, translated them, and made them accessible to future generations of worshipers.*

link historical eras, so too are they durable threads in today's tattered ecumenical cloak.

"Medieval" here means the long span from the fourth-century Bishop Ambrose early in the Constantinian era, through the so-called Dark Ages and the High Middle Ages of Bernard, Francis, and Thomas Aquinas, all the way to the very late medieval figures of Thomas à Kempis and Hus himself on the eve of the Reformation. The category of hymns also needs a broad definition. Many of the medieval texts we sing today were not originally hymns in congregational worship. Instead, they were monastic chants, folk songs, and some poetry that was put to music centuries later.

To start with some examples on the edges of the Latin Middle Ages, Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–397) wrote several hymns including the Advent standard that Luther translated, "Savior of the Nations, Come" (ELW 263, LSB 332).[2] Ambrose explicitly employed hymns and Psalm-singing in his dramatic fights on behalf of the Nicene Creed. He was joined in that campaign by Prudentius (348–ca. 410) whose Latin lyrics later became, thanks to John Mason Neale, the Christmas hymn, "Of the Father's Love Begotten" (ELW 295, LSB 384). From the Greek side of the Empire came the Easter hymns of John of Damascus (ca. 670–ca. 750), building on the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15. This time Neale's translations are from Greek: "The Day of Resurrection" (ELW 361, LSB 478) and "Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain" (ELW 363, LSB 487).[3]

From the Early Middle Ages, often and uncharitably called the "Dark Ages," we sing luminous lyrics such as the *Te Deum*, perhaps the greatest hymn text of all time ("We Praise You, O God," ELW 228, LSB 223–225; "Holy God, We Praise Your Name," ELW 414, LSB 940). Several hymns by Fortunatus (ca. 530–ca. 605), such as "Hail Thee, Festival Day" (ELW 394, LSB 489) and "The Royal Banners Forward

[2] Hymns will here be referenced from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), cited as ELW, from *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), cited as LSB, and occasionally from *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), cited as LBW.

[3] For helpful introductions to all the ELW hymns, see Paul Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010). For more detail on all the LSB hymns, see the *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns,* eds. Joseph Herl, Peter C. Reske, and Jon D. Vieker, 2 volumes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019).

Go" (LSB 455, LBW 124), also belie the era's dim reputation as "Dark." We sing several versions of "Come, Creator Spirit" (ELW 577–578, LSB 498–500, LBW 472–473), the powerful invocation of the Holy Spirit probably by Benedictine Abbot Rhabanus Maurus (ca. 780–856), also appreciated and translated by Luther. And what would Palm Sunday be without the processional "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" (ELW 344, LSB 442), from Theodulf of Orléans (ca. 760–821)?

There are many more such hymns from the Early Middle Ages, mostly anonymous and often translated by the tireless John Mason Neale.

"That Easter Day with Joy Was Bright" (ELW 384)

"Christ is Made the Sure Foundation" (ELW 645, LSB 909/912)

"Creator of the Stars of Night" (ELW 245, LSB 351)

"Hark, A Thrilling Voice is Sounding" (ELW 246, LSB 345)

"A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing" (ELW 393)

Famous medieval names appear in our hymnals as sources for familiar texts. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) may not have written the poetry that became "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" (ELW 351–352, LSB 449–450), but he inspired it in a medieval follower.

Famous medieval names appear in our hymnals as sources for familiar texts. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) may not have written the poetry that became "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" (ELW 351–352, LSB 449–450), but he inspired it in a medieval follower. Originally about several body parts of the crucified Christ including the feet and hands, the poem was especially evocative about the face or head, covered in blood and spit. All ten stanzas of that section were translated by the German Lutheran Paul Gerhardt (1607–1676) and

the American Presbyterian James Waddell Alexander (1804–1859), but most hymnals have cut it down and cleaned up some of the brutal details. Bernard's eloquence about love also inspired another poem that has given us several short hymns: "Jesus, the Very Thought of You" (ELW 754, LBW 316), "O Jesus, Joy of Loving Hearts" (ELW 658, LBW 356), and "O Jesus, King Most Wonderful" (LSB 553, LBW 537). Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) is famous for later legends but he really did write the canticle about God's good creation including Brother Sun and Sister Moon that we sing as "All Creatures" (ELW 835, LBW 527). Pope Francis chose not only this author's name for himself but also this canticle's theme and its Italian refrain for his environmental encyclical in 2015: *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home.* Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) may be better known for his systematic summation of theology, but he also wrote sacramental poetry, probably including "Thee We Adore" (ELW 476, LSB 640). In the Lord's Supper, Christ is both hidden and yet also powerfully revealed, especially to the sense of hearing, although that second stanza is routinely dropped from hymnals today.

Here too there are many more medieval examples, and they nicely span the liturgical calendar.

Advent: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (ELW 257, LSB 357)

Christmas: "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" (ELW 272, LSB 359) and "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice" (ELW 288, LSB 386)

Epiphany: "Oh, Wondrous Image, Vision Fair" (ELW 316, LSB 413)

Transfiguration, eve of Lent: "Alleluia, Song of Gladness" (ELW 318, LSB 417)

Lent: "The Glory of These Forty Days" (ELW 320)

Good Friday: "Wide Open Are Your Hands" (LBW 489), also from the poem that inspired "O Sacred Head"

Easter: "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" (ELW 365, LSB 457), and other late medieval Easter hymns

By the fifteenth century, themes congenial to Luther's coming Reformation were already being sung, such as the text attributed to the *Imitation of Christ* author Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471), "O Love, How Deep" (ELW 322, LSB 544). Its refrain, "for us," matches Christ's words at the Last Supper, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins," and anticipates Luther's renewal of that message. A communion hymn associated with forerunner Jan Hus (ca. 1370–1415) was freely adapted by Luther himself: "Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior" (LSB 627).[4]

Luther's Example

It is Luther's own example of using prior texts for hymn-singing that centers the claim for our treasury of medieval hymns.[5] Besides putting biblical and liturgical texts to hymnic use in German, and famously so for some Psalms and parts of the Mass, Luther appropriated multiple hymns from medieval Christianity. Some were full-scale Latin texts that he translated. Others were single stanzas in German that he built upon by expansion. As already sampled, he translated not only the well-known work by Ambrose but also two parts of a long Latin poem by Coelius Sedulius (d. ca. 540).[6] Both the anonymous *Te Deum* and "Come, Creator Spirit," as noted earlier, received his affirmation and translation.[7] Especially apparent in the Hus hymn just mentioned, Luther's translations always involved theological interpretations as is well-known from his biblical work.

[4] Martin Luther, "Jesus Christ, Our God and Savior" (1524), in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–) 53: 250–251.

[5] For more on Luther's hymns, see Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007; reprinted Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), and Dorothea Wendebourg, "Selected Hymns," in *The Annotated Luther: Pastoral Writings,* ed. Mary Jane Haemig (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 105–146.

[6] *LW* 53:237–240, 302–303

[7] *LW* 53:171–175, 260–262

But Luther wanted more than translations. In developing a worship service for the evangelical movement in 1523, whether partially or wholly in the vernacular, Luther named some German hymns that were already known and sung in his time, and he called for new ones

But Luther wanted more than translations. In developing a worship service for the evangelical movement in 1523, whether partially or wholly in the vernacular, Luther named some German hymns that were already known and sung in his time, and he called for new ones. The precedents he named can indicate the specific strategy he also applied in many other cases.

But poets are wanting among us, or not yet known, who could compose evangelical and spiritual songs, as Paul calls them [Col 3:16], worthy to be used in the church of God. In the meantime, one may sing after communion, "Let God be blest, be praised, and thanked, who to us himself hath granted" (*Gott sei gelobet und gebenedeiet*) … Another good [hymn] is "Now Let Us Pray to the Holy Ghost" (*Nun bitten wir den heiligen Geist*) … For few are found that are written in a proper and devotional style. I mention this to encourage any German poets to compose evangelical hymns for us.[8]

Besides calling on others to write new hymns, as he himself started doing at this time, Luther here commends two prior German songs for regular use in worship. That there actually were any such hymns in German before Luther may seem surprising, as also with prior German Bibles, but in fact they were quite numerous. These two are good first examples of how Luther received and built upon a late medieval legacy.

Before the Reformation, "Let God Be Blest" ("O Lord, We Praise You," ELW 499 and LSB 617) was a well-known folk song used during public processionals on the Feast of Corpus Christi, but only

[8] *LW* 53:36–37. The pre-Reformation precedents for singing hymns in German was also cited in Philip Melanchthon's *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 258.

one stanza.[9] (It is called a "Leise," from the group of such songs that expanded on the *Kyrie eleison*.) Luther not only commended it as a post-communion hymn, indeed one that suggested long-standing support for partaking of both bread and wine, he also added new stanzas to it, extolling the benefits of receiving the sacrament. The familiarity of the hymn got the congregational singing started, an achievement not to be assumed, and then they found themselves singing new stanzas, Luther's original contribution. This pattern recurs in the second hymn Luther mentioned, "Now to the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray" (ELW 743, LSB 768).[10] The first stanza was known long and well as a German Leise, as apparent in the concluding "Lord, have mercy." Luther's recommended placement and role for this hymn is to introduce the reading of the Gospel.[11] The initial text and the tune were familiar and thus led the singers into Luther's additional stanzas, reinforcing his message that the Holy Spirit helps us know and cling to Christ (now stanza 4). Luther did the same thing for yet another invocation of the Holy Spirit, "Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord" (ELW 395, LSB 497).[12] In text and tune, the first stanza was a well-known song that was sequential to the liturgical Alleluia, as still glimpsed in its conclusion. Luther praised it highly and again built upon the medieval legacy by adding more stanzas.

Of the several other examples of this pattern, perhaps the most complex involves Luther's Easter hymn, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bonds" (ELW 370, LSB 458, LBW 124). "Christians, to the Paschal Victim" (ELW 371, LSB 460) was a well-known medieval addition to the Latin rite for Easter and it finds an echo in Luther's original fourth stanza. From the medieval text, "death and life have contended in that combat stupendous" became the Reformer's line, "It was a strange and dreadful strife when life and death contended." Luther put that pivotal wording dead center in his symmetrical arrangement of seven stanzas, but it is now moved or missing in some hymnals (stanza 2 in LBW 134, missing in ELW 370). The medieval German Leise "Christ is Arisen" (ELW 372, LSB 459) also fed into Luther's Easter hymn not only in its theme but also in the melody. Again, we see

[9] *LW* 53:252–254
[10] *LW* 53:263–264
[11] *LW* 53:74
[12] *LW* 53:265–267

the apparent and effective strategy of getting people to sing something familiar and then expanding upon it with the full message.

Here too there are yet more examples of Luther building a full hymn upon a short medieval text.

> "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth" (LSB 382, LBW 48)[13]
>
> "Triune God, Be Thou Our Stay" (LSB 505)[14]
>
> "In the Very Midst of Life" (LSB 755, LBW 350, All Creation Sings 1026)[15]

Just the musical samples would take us far afield, for Ulrich Leupold lists fully twenty Luther hymns that used pre-existing melodies.[16] Among them are important and popular hymns such as the early and comprehensive "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (ELW 594, LSB 556) and the Christmas family favorite, "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" (ELW 268, LSB 358).

Conclusion

As with Luther's work on biblical and liturgical texts, the point from such numerous examples of his hymnody is that the evangelical movement was not a total break from Christian tradition, including the medieval church, but rather an adaptation of it. It was meant as a reform, not a rupture...

As with Luther's work on biblical and liturgical texts, the point from such numerous examples of his hymnody is that the evangelical

[13] *LW* 53:240
[14] *LW* 53:268
[15] *LW* 53:274
[16] *LW* 53:208

movement was not a total break from Christian tradition, including the medieval church, but rather an adaptation of it. It was meant as a reform, not a rupture, although his excommunication then led to the wider rift. When we sing these hymns today, we are joining that expression of continuity with the church before the Reformation, even if we rarely notice the fine print about their sources. They are "our" treasury only because we are part of the larger Christian communion. Ecumenical dialogues may rise and fall, but actual hymn-singing expresses and reinforces the breadth and cohesion of the one church. After all, to turn the table, Roman Catholics today are singing hymns by Martin Luther, Charles Wesley, and Fanny Crosby.[17] ⊕

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[17] For more on all these hymns, within the context of a general church history using hymn texts as signposts, see Paul Rorem, *Singing Church History: Introducing the Christian Story Through Hymn Texts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024).