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# The German Hymn in English Translation

By WALTER G. TILLMANN

**ED. NOTE:** The writer of this article is professor in the Department of Modern Languages at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa. In this study he had the assistance of the following members of a class in Early New High German Literature: Frank Benz, Henry Borgardt, Emmett Busch, Paul Hanselmann, Marvin Hartmann, Fred Hueners, John Kuper, Reuben Schaidt, Kenneth Truckenbrod, and Wilbert Winkler.

**T**HE German hymn is one of the most precious treasures of the Lutheran Church. Ever since 1523, when Martin Luther and his co-workers began to write "German Psalms" for the congregation, the hymn and spiritual song has taken its place in the congregational life; next to the preaching of the Word and the teaching of the Catechism, there is nothing so dear to the Lutheran as the rich heritage of the "singing church."

With the exception of German hymns written before the Reformation and a few hundred by Reformed and Roman Catholic authors since then, almost all of the 100,000 or more German hymns and spiritual songs were written by Lutherans. Most of these hymns are forgotten today, but about five per cent, or roughly 5,000, have survived the centuries and are still sung today, although many of them are not known generally. Of this number about ten per cent, or a little more than 500, have been translated into the English language.

A study was made of eleven Lutheran and six non-Lutheran American hymnals\* in order to ascertain the number of German to the total number of hymns, the most widely used German hymns,

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\* *The Lutheran Hymnal* (Syn. Conf.); *The Ev. Luth. Hymn-Book* \* (Mo. Synod); *The American Lutheran Hymnal* (A. L. C.); *The Wartburg Hymnal* \* (Iowa Synod); *The Ev. Luth. Hymnal* \* (Ohio Synod); *The Common Service Book* (U. L. C. A.); *The Book of Worship* \* (Gen. Council); *The Lutheran Hymnary* (E. L. C.); *The Hymnal for Church and Home* (Danish Synods); *The Concordia Hymnal* (Free Church); *The Hymnal* (Aug.); and the following non-Lutheran hymnals: Protestant Episcopal; Presbyterians in the U. S. A.; Methodist; Baptist (*The Service Hymnal*); Evangelical-Reformed; and Evangelical-United Brethren. — Hymnals with asterisks are no longer in common use.



hymns translated in these books, the percentage of German hymns and pertinent facts about the German hymn writers who are represented in American hymnals.

# I. NUMBER OF GERMAN HYMNS AND PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL NUMBER IN EACH HYMNAL

*The Lutheran Hymnal* (Syn. Conf.) contains the largest number of German hymns and spiritual songs (250). However, percentage-wise, the old hymnals of the former Iowa Synod and Ohio Synod show a slightly larger emphasis on German hymns (43% and 39% to 38% in the Syn. Conf. hymnal). Surprisingly the *E. L. C. Hymnary* has a larger representation of German hymns (33%) than the *A. L. C. Hymnal*. *The Common Service Book*, with only 113 German hymns (20%), is close to the bottom, with only three Scandinavian hymnals trailing close behind. But since these three Scandinavian hymnals have a larger share of the Scandinavian heritage of hymnody than *The Common Service Book*, the U. L. C. A. hymnal presents the least number of Lutheran hymns in its hymnal. *The Book of Worship* of the old General Council has not been included in this tabulation, because it antedates the other Lutheran hymnals by many decades, and German hymn translations were not common at the time of its publication. The six non-Lutheran hymnals have only a total of 181 hymns of German origin or about 5% of their hymns. In all 480 German hymns are found in the seventeen hymnals.

TABLE I: Number of German Hymns and Percentage of the Total Number of Hymns Found in Each Hymnal

<i>Lutheran Hymnal</i> _____	Syn. Conf. _____	250	38%
<i>Lutheran Hymnary</i> _____	E. L. C. _____	204	33%
<i>American Luth. Hymnal</i> _____	A. L. C. _____	204	31%
<i>Evang. Luth. Hymnal</i> _____	Ohio Synod * _____	199	39%
<i>Evang. Luth. Hymn-Book</i> _____	Mo. Synod * _____	191	34%
<i>Warburg Hymnal</i> _____	Iowa Synod * _____	163	43%
<i>Common Service Book</i> _____	U. L. C. A. _____	113	20%
<i>The Hymnal</i> _____	Augustana _____	101	16%
<i>Concordia Hymnal</i> _____	Free Church _____	83	19%
<i>Hymnal f. Church and Home</i> _____	Danish Synods _____	78	17%
<i>Six Non-Lutheran Hymnals</i> , _____	Total _____	181	ca. 5%

\* No longer in common use.



## II. THE MOST WIDELY TRANSLATED AND PUBLISHED GERMAN HYMNS

Many German hymns have been translated several times. Thus we find a great variety of translations of the same hymns, which often makes it difficult to ascertain the original German first line. Luther's "A Mighty Fortress," e.g., has been translated at least twenty-seven times, often quite freely. Problems arising from these divergences in translation are many. Often the meaning of the original is changed, the intention of the author is ignored, and it is practically impossible to find an authoritative version of the better known hymns which could be memorized and sung by Lutherans without the help of a hymnbook. As a matter of fact, very few German hymns lend themselves for memorization in the English language. This is a serious drawback, since a thorough knowledge of the best hymns of our faith has served as a strong bulwark in the centuries gone by in times of stress and need. Apart from a few well-known hymns, like "Beautiful Savior," and spiritual songs, like "Silent Night," very few hymns are part of the Lutheran life in America. None of Luther's hymns, none of Gerhardt's hymns, none of the hymns of the other great hymn writers of Germany, has become part and parcel of our Lutheran life. The so-called Cradle Hymn, "Away in the Manger," is definitely not by Luther.

Apart from the above-mentioned multiplicity of translations, the freedom which authors have taken with the original is another matter of concern to those who are interested in preserving the purity of doctrine as expressed in those hymns. A very interesting study could be made of the many "heroic," even outright boastful translations of "A Mighty Fortress." \* There are other drawbacks. Whereas inspired poets have sinned against the original emphasis of the German hymn writer, well-intentioned but poorly prepared translators have sinned against the King's English. An intelligent reading of German hymns in English (without the benefit of notes) will bring to the reader the painful realization that many of these translations are not written in good English. There are, of course, a number of exceptions. But most of the translations which were made during the First World War or during the years of rapid

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\* See the article by the author in the *Lutheran Quarterly*, Feb. 1954. "Nor any thanks have for it."



transition from the German to the English language were written under pressure. There is a crying need for retranslating these hundreds of hymns, which are so beautiful and so familiar in German, but which cannot become American until they have been given us in good American idiom. Another wholly unnecessary drawback is this: In some Scandinavian hymnals practically all German hymns have come to us by way of a Scandinavian language. Whoever is familiar with the devious ways of secondhand translations can fathom the dangers which are inherent in this questionable practice of some of our hymnal editors.

In spite of all this the number of German hymns in our hymnals and the frequency of their publication are a fine tribute to the pioneer translators who with consecrated effort tried to preserve for the Lutheran Church the heritage of the Fathers. This, of course, points the way to the responsibility of those who are American-born, have been brought up in an English-speaking church, and have enjoyed a better American education than their elders, to try their hand in making this treasury truly American before it disappears from our hymnbooks. The trend, as exemplified in *The Common Service Book*, and as anticipated in the new intersynodical venture to be published under the auspices of several National Lutheran Council Churches, is toward the exclusion of many, perhaps most, of these "heavy, un-American" translations. This means, of course, that the Lutheran hymnbook of the future will be made up largely of non-Lutheran hymns, which in itself is not necessarily a dangerous procedure. And yet it means the loss of some of the finest gems which we have in our church, a treasure which has meant so much to our fathers in times of trial and spiritual indifference.

The following table will show which German hymns are at present the most popular hymns in American hymnbooks.

TABLE II: *The Most Widely Published German Hymns in English Translation*

No. of  
Occurrences

18 A mighty Fortress — Ein' feste Burg (Luther) \*

Now thank we all our God — Nun danket alle Gott (Rinckart)

\* Of some of the better-known hymns two versions are printed in some hymnals.

- 15 All my heart this night rejoices — Fröhlich soll mein Herze springen  
(Gerhardt)  
Praise to the Lord — Lobe den Herren (Neander)
- 14 From heav'n above — Vom Himmel hoch (Luther)  
Silent night — Stille Nacht (Mohr)  
Come, Thou bright and morning Star — Morgenglanz der Ewigkeit  
(Rosenroth)
- 13 If thou but suffer God to guide thee — Wer nur den lieben Gott  
(Neumark)  
Wake, awake, for night is flying — Wachet auf, ruft (Nicolai)  
My Jesus, as Thou wilt — Mein Jesus, wie du willst (Schmolck)  
Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness — Christi Blut (Zinzendorf)
- 12 Jesus, lead Thou on — Jesu, geh voran (Zinzendorf)  
Beautiful Savior — Schönster Herr Jesu (anon.)  
Blessed Jesus, at Thy Word — Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier  
(Clausnitzer)  
Soul, adorn thyself with gladness — Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele  
(also: Deck thyself . . .) (Joh. Franck)  
Commit thou all thy griefs — Befiehl du deine Wege (Gerhardt)  
O dearest Jesus, what law hast Thou broken — Herzliebster Jesu  
(Heermann)  
Jesus sinners doth receive — Jesus nimmt die Sünder an (Neu-  
meister)  
How lovely shines the Morning Star — Wie schön leuchtet  
(Nicolai)  
Lift up your heads — Macht hoch die Tür (Weissel)
- 11 All glory be to God on high — Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'  
(Decius)  
Jesus, priceless Treasure — Jesu, meine Freude (Joh. Franck)  
O Lord, how shall I meet Thee — Wie soll ich dich empfangen  
(Gerhardt)  
(also: Oh, how shall I receive Thee)  
If God Himself be for me — Ist Gott für mich, so trete (Gerhardt)  
Rejoice all ye believers — Ermuntert euch, ihr Frommen  
(Laurentii)  
O happy home, where Thou art loved — O selig Haus (Spitta)  
Abide, o dearest Jesus — Ach bleib' mit deiner Gnade (Stegmann)  
Let me be Thine forever — Lass mich dein . . . bleiben (Selnecker)
- 10 Now rest beneath night's shadow — Nun ruhen alle Wälder  
(Gerhardt)  
O Christ, our true and only Light — O Jesu Christe, wahres Licht  
(Heermann)  
From depths of woe I cry to Thee — Aus tiefer Not (Luther)  
(also: Out of the depths . . .)



Lord, keep us steadfast — Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort  
(Luther)

Baptized into Thy name — Ich bin getauft (Rambach)

Arise, ye sons of the Kingdom — Auf, auf, ihr Reichsgenossen  
(Rist)

Now I have found the firm foundation — Ich habe nun den Grund  
(Rothe)

Thee will I love, my Strength — Ich will dich lieben (Scheffler)

O Holy Spirit, enter in — O Heil'ger Geist, kehre bei uns ein  
(Schirmer)

What our Father does is well — Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan  
(Schmolck)

Welcome, Thou Victor — Willkommen, Held im Streite  
(Schmolck)

God calling yet — Gott ruft noch (Tersteegen)

Lord Jesus Christ, be present now — Herr Jesu Christ (Wilhelm II)

A study of this table gives some interesting sidelights. There are, first of all, the hymns which we expect to be there. But then there are a number of other hymns high on this list of which no one suspected that they had found entrance into so many hymnals. Finally, a number of hymns which one would consider very popular show up near the bottom of the list or are not listed at all among those which found a place in at least ten hymnals (or in ten versions). The table also shows which hymns Lutheran editors usually consider best fitted for their hymnals. A more detailed study also would show which hymns and hymn writers are looked upon with disfavor by certain editors.

### III. REPRESENTATION OF GERMAN HYMN WRITERS

Only comparatively few German hymn writers had three or more of their hymns translated into English (28 of 194). Paul Gerhardt leads the list in point of number (35), although his percentage — in comparison with the total number of hymns which he wrote — is much lower than Luther's, of whose hymns 33 have been translated in the hymnals (33 out of 36 for Luther, as compared with 35 out of 130 for Gerhardt). Thus Luther heads the tabulation with 92% of his hymns in the hymnals under investigation.\* The same must be kept in mind when looking at the other best-

\* All 36 of Luther's hymns have been translated into English, and the translations are available in one or two books dealing with Luther's hymns, but the Lutheran hymnals contain only 33 of them.

represented hymn writers: Zinzendorf wrote more than 900 hymns, but only 8 of his hymns survive in our American hymnals. Some others have written as many as two thousand and more hymns, but only a very small fraction of one per cent of their total output is still being found in present-day hymnals, both German and American. A study of this relationship of total production and survival of hymns will give a true indication of the greatness of a hymn writer. For the present, however, we must be satisfied with the tabulation of the most frequently published German hymnists.

TABLE III: *Representation of German Hymn Writers*

Number of hymns in American hymnals	
35	Paul Gerhardt
33	Martin Luther
15	Benjamin Schmolck
12	Johann Heermann
	Carl Joh. Philipp Spitta
9	Johann Rist
8	Johann Olearius
	Johannes Scheffler (Angelus Silesius)
	Nikolaus Ludw. Count v. Zinzendorf
7	Johannes Franck
	Nicolaus Selnecker
	Gerhard Tersteegen
5	Paul Eber
	Nicolaus Herman
	Joachim Neander
4	Christian Gottlieb Barth
	David Denike
	Salomo Franck
	Philipp Friedrich Hiller
	Caspar Neumann
	Johann Jacob Rambach
3	Ernst Moritz Arndt
	Martin Behm
	Ludwig Andreas Gotter
	Ludwig Helmbold
	Balthasar Münter
	Erdmann Neumeister
	Bartholomäus Ringwald
Total represented with three or more hymns	
Total represented with one or two hymns	
Total of all hymn writers represented	
	28
	166
	<hr/> 194



A comparison with table II shows that some of the most popular hymns were written by writers who are represented with only one or two hymns, e.g., Rinckart's "*Nun danket alle Gott*." Of one very widely used German hymn ("Beautiful Savior") we do not even know the author. Thus the third table does not necessarily indicate that the other writers are inferior to those contained in the table. It does show, however, which hymn writers are the favorites with Lutheran editors and/or whose hymns have come down to us in the largest number.

#### IV. DATE OF BIRTH OF THE HYMN WRITERS

Only 6% of the writers whose hymns are found in our hymnals belonged to the generation of Martin Luther. A total of 18% were born during the century of the Reformation, about 9% during Luther's adult years until shortly after his death and about 9% during the turbulent half-century following the Reformer's death. Almost half of the writers (43%) were born during the century of the Thirty Years' War, 24% were contemporaries of Paul Gerhardt, and 19% were born in the second half of the century. The eighteenth century is represented by 20% of all hymn writers, but those born after 1800 make up only 5%. Very few writers born after 1850 are represented in the Lutheran hymnals of America.

The significant fact of this table is that the large majority of our hymns were written within 150 years of the Reformation and that hymn writing at the present is at a low ebb. (There are many hymns being written in Germany. But are they acceptable to our hymnbook editors?)

TABLE IV: *Date of Birth of German Hymn Writers*

Born Before 1500	12	( 6%)
1500—1549	17	( 9%)
1550—1599	18	( 9%)
1600—1649	46	(24%)
1650—1699	37	(19%)
1700—1749	19	(10%)
1750—1799	19	(10%)
1800—1849	10	( 5%)
Birthdate unknown	16	( 8%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>(100%)</b>

## V. BIRTHPLACE OF THE HYMN WRITERS

Two thirds of the writers whose birthplace is known to us were born in places which are now behind the iron curtain. The largest single group is Silesian (16%). Silesia today is under Polish administration. The writers whose birthplace is in the "Lutherlands" (Thuringia, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt) number 66, or 35% of the total. The "Lutherlands" today are in the Soviet zone of Germany. In Free Germany and Free Europe the representation of the birthplaces is scattered. The largest groups in these sections are the Swabians (6%) and the Bavarians (6%), followed by Hessians (5%), Rhinelanders (2%), Lower Saxons (3%), and others. Only 26% of the writers were born within the territory of the present-day Federal Republic of Germany. If this tabulation is an indication of the dangers surrounding the Lutheran Church in the homeland of the Reformation, it would show that 20% or more of the strength of the Lutheran Church in Germany has been wiped off the map ("The Lost Territories"), that 40% of the productivity of the Church is hampered by an anti-Christian government within Germany (the Soviet Zone), and that only one third of the territory which has produced German hymn writers is comparatively free at the present time. Of course, such deductions can be carried too far, but the table is indicative of the relative strength of our church in history.

TABLE V: *Birthplace of the Hymn Writers*

## I. Behind the Iron Curtain

## A. The Lost Territories (East of Oder-Neisse)

Silesia	29	( 16%)
Pomerania	2	( 1%)
East Prussia	4	( 2%)
Others	2	( 1%)

## B. Soviet Zone

Thuringia	27	( 15%)
Saxony State	20	( 10%)
Saxony-Anhalt	20	( 10%)
Brandenburg	6	( 3%)
Mecklenburg	1	( —)

## C. Other Iron Curtain Lands

Bohemia	6	( 3%)
Austria, Hungary	2	( 1%)

<b>Total Behind Iron Cur.</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>( 62%)</b>
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## II. In Free Germany and Europe

## A. Federal Republic

Bavaria	12	( 6%)
Hesse	10	( 5%)
Wurtt.-Baden	12	( 6%)
Lower Saxony	6	( 3%)
Schleswig, etc.	4	( 2%)
Brunswick	2	( 1%)
Rhineland	4	( 2%)
Palatinate	2	( 1%)

## B. Other Western Countries

Switzerland	5	( 2%)
France (Alsace)	2	( 1%)
Netherlands	1	( 1%)

Total for the West	60	( 30%)
Birthplace Not Known	15	( 8%)
Total	194	(100%)