



EIN FESTE BURG

Then and now

Very significant in the Reformation movement started 500 years ago by Martin Luther was the hymn he wrote *Ein feste burg ist unser Gott*.



On Saturday 17/6/17 at Oxford Henrike Lähnemann, Professor of Medieval German Literature and Linguistics, gave *A Historical and Practical Introduction to Singing the Reformation*.

She raised points (see page 2) which may help us to think and talk about:

- what happened there & then
- how it spread to Britain
- how it links with 20th & 21st century developments
- our experiences of these

Origin and translations

Luther based a lot of his hymns in German on Psalms interpreted with Paul's theology of salvation.

Ein feste burg was based on Psalm 46.

Of over 70 versions of the hymn in English, most well known may be Thomas Carlyle's from 1831.

Psalm 46 NRSV

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake
in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble
with its tumult. *Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams
make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation
of the Most High.
⁵ God is in the midst of the city;
it shall not be moved;
God will help it when
the morning dawns.
⁶ The nations are in an uproar,
the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice,
the earth melts.
⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of
the Lord;
see what desolations he has
brought on the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease to
the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow,
and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
¹⁰ 'Be still, and know that
I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'
¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
Selah

Hymn transl. Thomas Carlyle

1 A safe stronghold
our God is still,
a trusty shield and weapon;
he'll keep us clear from all the ill
that hath us now o'ertaken.
The ancient prince of hell
hath risen with purpose fell;
strong mail of craft and power
he weareth in this hour;
on earth is not his fellow.

2 With force of arms
we nothing can,
full soon were we down-ridden;
but for us fights the proper Man
whom God himself hath bidden.
Ask ye who is this same?
Christ Jesus is his name,
the Lord Sabaoth's Son;
he, and no other one,
shall conquer in the battle.

3 And were this world
all devils o'er,
and watching to devour us,
we lay it not to heart so sore;
they cannot overpower us.
And let the prince of ill
look grim as e'er he will,
he harms us not a whit;
for why? his doom is writ;
a word shall quickly slay him.

4 God's word,
for all their craft and force,
one moment will not linger,
but, spite of hell,
shall have its course;
'tis written by his finger.
And though they take our life,
goods, honour, children, wife,
yet is their profit small;
these things shall vanish all:
the city of God remaineth.

Source: Church Hymnary (4th ed.) #454



OUR GOD STANDS LIKE A FORTRESS ROCK

Henrike Lähnemann on Singing the Reformation

a) Three factors for quick spread of Luther's Reformation in German:

- Translation of Bible
- Printing and cheaper paper
- Singing Christian theology from printed broadsheets

b) 1513 Luther started lecturing in Wittenberg, on Psalms
 1517 95 theses re God's grace & how to administer redemption
 1522 His New Testament printed
 1524 First book of his songs previously on broadsheets
 1529 Larger hymnbook including *Ein feste burg*

1533 Coverdale printed hymnbooks translated to English for colleges&churches in England

c) Original tune of *Ein feste burg* sounds like a battle cry, combative but joyful.

Bach & Mendelsohn changed it to slow sedate baroque rhythm.

We continue to use that style, but post-war German books have returned to combative tune.

d) National Socialist assemblies sang v1 only, in slow harmony = we are on right side, of God. Confessing Church ended their assemblies with v4 only, in old rhythm, to protest & resist.

e) Post-war German hymnbooks have also rejected other sweet or militaristic 19th century tunes & pietistic evangelical hymns. Also dropped folk(*volk*) songs. But new Kirchentag songs have revived singing among young people in Germany.

Hymn transl. Ronald Orchard 1991 for Rejoice & Sing (585)

1 Our God stands like a fortress rock with walls that will not fail us; he helps us brace against the shock of fears which now assail us. The enemy of old in wickedness is bold; this seems his victory hour, he fears no earthly power and arms himself with cunning.

2 We win no battles through our might, we fall at once, dejected; the righteous one will lead our fight, by God himself directed. You ask, 'Who can this be?' Christ Jesus, it is he, eternal King and Lord, God's true and living word, no-one can stand against him.

3 And though the world seems full of ill, with hungry devils prowling, Christ's victory is with us still, we need not fear their howling. The tyrants of this age strut briefly on the stage: their sentence has been passed. We stand unharmed at last, a word from God destroys them.

4 God's word and plan, which they pretend is subject to their pleasure, will bind their wills to serve God's end, which we, who love him, treasure. Then let them take our lives, goods, children, husbands, wives, and carry all away; theirs is a short-lived day, ours is the lasting kingdom.

Sung at ASA on 11/6/17. At Breakfast Church I'll read Orchard's thoughts when translating.

Original rhythm

Music copied from *Companion to Rejoice & Sing* © The United Reformed Church 1999, p711



4 Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn / und kein' Dank dazu haben;
 er ist bei uns wohl auf dem Plan / mit seinem Geist und Gaben.
 Nehmen sie den Leib, / Gut, Ehr, Kind und Weib:
 lass fahren dahin, / sie haben's kein' Gewinn,
 das Reich muss uns doch bleiben.

Words copied from the hymnal by Johann Spangenberg, Magdeburg, 1545, in Wikipedia