"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (German: "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott") is one of the best known hymns by the reformer Martin Luther, a prolific hymnodist. Luther wrote the words and composed the melody sometime between 1527 and 1529. It has been translated into English at least seventy times and also into many other languages. The words are a paraphrase of Psalm 46.

### History

"A Mighty Fortress" is one of the best loved hymns of the Lutheran tradition and among Protestants more generally. It has been called the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation" for the effect it had in increasing the support for the Reformers' cause. John Julian records four theories of its origin:

- **Heinrich Heine**: "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" was sung by Luther and his companions as they entered Worms on 16 April 1521 for the Diet;
- **K. F. T. Schneider**: it was a tribute to Luther's friend Leonhard Kaiser, who was executed on 16 August 1527;
- **Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné**: it was sung by the German Lutheran princes as they entered Augsburg for the Diet in 1530 at which the Augsburg Confession was presented; and
- the view that it was composed in connection with the 1529 Diet of Speyer at which the German Lutheran princes lodged their protest to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who wanted to enforce his 1521 Edict of Worms.

Alternatively, John M. Merriman writes that the hymn "began as a martial song to inspire soldiers against the Ottoman forces" during the Ottoman wars in Europe.

The earliest extant hymn in which it appears is that of Andrew Rauscher (1531), but it is supposed to have been in Joseph Klug's Wittenberg hymnal of 1529, of which no copy exists. Its title was Der xxxxvi. Psalm. Deus noster refugium et virtus. Before that it is supposed to have appeared in the Hans Weiss Wittenberg hymnal of 1528, also lost.

The song was used like an anthem by Sweden during the Thirty Years' War.

### Lyrics

Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott, ein gute Wehr und Waffen. 
Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not, die uns jetzt hat betroffen.

Der alt böse Feind mit Ernst er's jetzt meint, groß Macht und viel List sein grausam Rüstung ist, auf Erd ist nicht seinsgleichen.
Mit unserer Macht ist nichts getan,
mit unserer Stärke nicht ein Wort
den Gott hat selbst erkoren.
Fragest du, wer der ist?
Er heißt Jesus Christ,
der Herr Zebaoth,
und ist kein ander Gott,
das Feld muss er behalten.

Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel wär
und wollt uns gar verschlingen,
so fürchten wir uns nicht so sehr,
es soll uns doch gelingen.
Der Fürst dieser Welt,
wie sau’re er sich stellt,
tut er uns doch nicht;
das macht, er ist gericht’;
ein Wörtlein kann ihn fällen.

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.

Tune

Luther composed the melody, named “Ein feste Burg” from the text’s first line, in meter 87.87.55.56.7. This is sometimes denoted “rhythmic tune” to distinguish it from the later isometric variant, in 87.87.66.66.7-meter which is more widely known and used in Christendom.[6] In 1906 Edouard Rœhrich wrote, “The authentic form of this melody differs very much from that which one sings in most Protestant churches and figures in (Giacomo Meyerbeer’s) The Huguenots. ... The original melody is extremely rhythmic, by the way it bends to all the nuances of the text ...”[7]

While 19th-century musicologists disputed Luther’s authorship of the music to the hymn, that opinion has been modified by more recent research; it is now the consensus view of musical scholars that Luther did indeed compose the famous tune to go with the words.[citation needed]

Reception

Tradition states that the sixth Lutheran King of Sweden, Gustavus Adolphus, had it played as his forces went to battle in the Thirty Years’ War. The hymn had been translated into Swedish already in 1536, presumably by Olaus Petri, with the incipit, Vår Gud är oss en väldig borg.[8] In the late 19th century the song also became an anthem of the early Swedish socialist movement.

The hymn’s enduring popularity in Western Christendom has breached boundaries set in the Reformation as it is now a suggested hymn for Catholic Masses.[9] It currently appears in the second edition of the Catholic Book of Worship, published by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, though its adoption is not without controversy.[citation needed]

In Germany, “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott” was historically also used as a patriotic paean which is why it was regularly sung at nationalistic events such as the Wartburg Festival in 1817.[10] This patriotic undertone of the hymn emanates from its importance for the Reformation in general which was regarded by the Protestants not only as a religious but as a
national movement delivering Germany from Roman oppression.[11] Furthermore, the last line of the fourth stanza of the German text reads: “Das Reich muss uns doch bleiben” which is generally translated into English as “The Kingdom must remain ours” whilst it may also be interpreted as meaning: the Holy Roman Empire must remain with the Germans.

**English translations**

The first English translation is by Myles Coverdale in 1539 with the title, *Our God is a defence and towre.* The first English translation in "common usage" was *God is our Refuge in Distress, Our strong Defence* in J.C. Jacobi’s Psal. Ger., 1722, p. 83.[1]

An English version less literal in translation but more popular among Protestant denominations outside Lutheranism is *A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing*, translated by Frederick H. Hedge in 1853; this version is the one included in the United Methodist Hymnal. Another popular English translation is by Thomas Carlyle and begins *A safe stronghold our God is still.*

Most North American Lutheran churches have not historically used either the Hedge or Carlyle translations. Traditionally, the most commonly used translation in Lutheran congregations is a composite translation from the 1868 Pennsylvania Lutheran Church Book (“A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon”). In more recent years a new translation completed for the 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship (“A mighty fortress is our God, a sword and shield victorious”) has also gained significant popularity.

**Compositions based on the hymn**

*A Mighty Fortress* sung in English

Sorry, your browser either has JavaScript disabled or does not have any supported player.
You can download the clip or download a player to play the clip in your browser.
*A Mighty Fortress is Our God* – F.H. Hedge (English) translation

*Ein feste Burg* sung in German

Sorry, your browser either has JavaScript disabled or does not have any supported player.
You can download the clip or download a player to play the clip in your browser.
The German text of *Ein feste Burg* sung to the isometric, more widely known arrangement of its traditional melody.

Problems playing these files? See media help.

The hymn has been used by numerous composers, including Johann Sebastian Bach as the source for his *chorale cantata Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, BWV 80. Bach set the tune twice in his *Choralgesänge* (*Choral Hymns*), BWV 302 and BWV 303 (for four voices). He used strains of the tune in his *Christmas Oratorio*. There is a version for organ, Chorale Prelude BWV 720, written by Bach for the organ at Divi Blasii, Mühlhausen. Two orchestrations of Bach's settings were made by conductors Leopold Stokowski and Walter Damrosch. Dieterich Buxtehude also wrote an organ chorale setting (BuxWV 184), as did Johann Pachelbel. Georg Friedrich Handel used the melody in his Solomon, which is probably wrong attribution.[12] And Georg Philipp Telemann also made a choral arrangement of this hymn.

Felix Mendelssohn used it as the theme for the fourth and final movement of his *Symphony No. 5*, Op. 107 (1830), which he named *Reformation* in honor of the *Protestant Reformation* started by Luther. Joachim Raff wrote an Overture (for orchestra), *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, Op. 127. Giacomo Meyerbeer quoted it in his five-act grand opera *Les Huguenots* (1836), and Richard Wagner used it as a "motive" in his *Kaisermarsch (Emperor's March)*, which was composed to commemorate the return of Kaiser Wilhelm I from the Franco-Prussian War in 1871.[13][14] Two organ settings were written by Max Reger; his chorale fantasia *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*, Op. 27, and a much shorter chorale prelude as No. 6 of his *52 Chorale Preludes*, Op. 67 in 1902. Claude Debussy quoted the theme in his suite for piano duet, *En blanc et noir*. Alexander Glazunov quoted the melody in his *Finnish Fantasy*, op. 88, along with several Finnish folk tunes.

Ralph Vaughan Williams used the tune in his score for the film *49th Parallel*, used most obviously when the German U-boat surfaces in Hudson Bay shortly after the beginning of the film. Flor Peeters wrote an organ chorale setting "Ein feste Burg" as part of his Ten Chorale Preludes, Op. 69, published in 1949. More recently it has been used by band composers to great effect in pieces such as *Psalm 46* by John Zdechlik and *The Holy War* by Ray Steadman-Allen. The hymn also features in *Luther*, an opera by Kari Tikka that premiered in 2000.[13][14]
In popular culture

- In The Simpsons episode, Brother Can You Spare Two Dimes? Ned Flanders' doorbell plays the opening notes of the song.[15]
- The hymn was sung at the National Cathedral during the funeral service for United States President Dwight Eisenhower. It was also used at the funerals of Thurgood Marshall and Ron Brown, and at the Prayer Service held at the National Cathedral on 14 September 2001.
- A version of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" was used as the theme for the children's television series Dave and Goliath, which was produced for the Lutheran Church in America.
- "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is the first song that the main character of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man encounters, chronologically within his own life.
- A Caribbean-style instrumental version is included in the Van Dyke Parks album Clang of the Yankee Reaper (1976), erroneously given as Johann Pachelbel's Canon.
- A jazz-fusion version is included in a brass choir arrangement in the song "Valley of the Shadows" by Bob James on the album, One.
- A Mighty Fortress is a supplement for the Dungeons & Dragons tabletop role-playing game; this supplement depicted the Renaissance and wars of religion as a campaign setting for this role-playing game.
- The WB series The Gilmore Girls features this hymn in an episode of the series' third season, when Zach, Brian and Dave are practicing for a gig at Mrs. Kim's house. The band re-writes the hymn after Zach protests the lyrics.
- A Mighty Fortress is David Weber's fourth novel in the Safehold series, which deals with a future world of Earth refugees controlled by a repressive religion that curtails innovation and forbids new technology.
- In the 1974 Polish film Potop, the chorale is heard as the Swedish forces are wheeling the large cannon to the siege of the monastery of Jasna Gora. The successful defense of the monastery during the Swedish Deluge is one of the most well known events in Polish military history. Polish Protestants took offense at the scene, since no evidence exist that the Swedish (largely Protestant) forces actually sang the hymn during the assault, and the causes of the Polish-Swedish War of 1655-1660, were political, not religious.

See also

- List of hymns by Martin Luther

References

7. ↑ E. Rœhrich, Les Origines du Choral Luthérien. (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1906), 23 (italics original): "La forme authentique de cette mélodie diffère beaucoup de celle qu'on chante dans la plupart des Églises protestantes et qui figure dans les Huguenots". ... La mélodie originelle est puissamment rythmée, de manière à se plier à toutes les nuances du texte qui figure dans les Huguenots.
8. ↑ Psalter och sanger (Örebro: Libris; Stockholm: Verbum, 1887), Item 237, which uses Johan Olof Wallin's 1816 revision of the translation attributed to Petri. The first line is "Vår Gud är oss en väldig borg.
9. ↑ Cantica Nova
12. ↑ Not in Handels Solomon (1749): J. E. Gardiner, in his liner notes to his 1984 recording of the oratorio, stated the usage of the melody in No. 56, the double chorus 'Praise the Lord'. It is however another melody by Martin Luther: a passage from the Sanctus of the German Mass (Deutsche Messe) "Holy is God, the Lord Zeboath" ("Heilig ist Gott, der Herre Zabaoth") See also http://www.credenda.org/archive/issues/15-2musica.php
13. ↑ Luther: An opera about a man between God and the Devil – Composed by Kari Tikka at www.kolumbus.fi
14. ↑ Volker Tarnow. "Luther lebt: Deutsche Momente" in Die Welt. 5 October 2004

The tune of 'A Mighty Fortress' is used behind the Auckland Grammar School song in New Zealand.
15. ↑ 8F23 Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes? ⚫
Bibliography


External links

- German Wikisource has original text related to this article: Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott
- Wikisource has original text related to this article: F.H. Hedge translation
“Ein feste Burg” sung by Austria's Daniela Stieb (in German)
Mit uns'rer Macht ist nichts getan, Wir sind gar bald verloren; Es streit't für uns der rechte Mann, Den Gott hat selbst erkoren. Fragst du, wer der ist? Er heißt Jesu Christ, Der Herr Zebaoth, Und ist kein and'rer Gott, Das Feld muß er behalten. No strength of ours can match his might! We would be lost, rejected. But now a champion comes to fight, Whom God himself elected. Ask who this may be: Lord of Hosts is he! Jesus Christ our Lord, God's only son, adored. He holds the field victorious. Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel wär, und wolltn uns gar verschlingen, so fürchten wir uns nicht so sehr,