

MARTIN LUTHER'S SPIRITUAL SONGS

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Martin Luther's Spiritual Songs by R. Massie

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R. MASSIE

MARTIN LUTHER'S SPIRITUAL SONGS



After Holbein

G. B. Black 1845

Luther.

Luther, Martin, 1483-1546

Martin Luther's

SPIRITUAL SONGS.

TRANSLATED BY

R. MASSIE, ESQ.,

OF ECCLESTON.

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1854.

Translator's Preface.

THOUGH Martin Luther is universally known, not only as the bold and uncompromising Reformer, but also as the author of many invaluable works in defence of the faith, few except his own countrymen are acquainted with him in the character of a poet and writer of spiritual songs: yet it was by these, scarcely less than by his practical and controversial writings, that he brought the doctrines of the Reformation home to the hearts and minds of the people. "Luther did as much," says Coleridge, "for the Reformation by his hymns as by his translation of the Bible. In Germany the hymns are known by heart by every peasant; they advise, they argue from the hymns, and every soul in the Church praises God, like a Christian, with words which are natural and yet sacred to his mind." If there be some exaggeration, there is also much truth in the remark of this highly-gifted man, and

there can be little doubt, that the Historian of the Reformation, who should omit all mention of these celebrated hymns, would overlook an important element in the accomplishment of that mighty work. "These hymns," says a modern writer, to whom we are indebted for an interesting chapter on Luther and his age,¹ "made a bond of union among men who knew little of Creeds and Articles: while Theologians were disputing about niceties of doctrine, every devout man could understand the blessedness of singing God's praises in good honest German, instead of gazing idly at the mass, or listening to a Latin Litany: the children learnt Luther's hymns in the cottage, and martyrs sang them on the scaffold." Many are the stories current in Germany respecting the effects of these hymns on the minds of the people. A pious man in Venice, upon reading Luther's Paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, without knowing its Author, is said to have cried out: "Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked." An eye-witness of the Reformation says of the hymn, "Dear Christians one and all rejoice,"² "who can doubt that by this hymn many

¹ Historical Sketches by J. H. Gurney.

² Nun freut euch Christen ins gemein.

hundreds of Christians have been converted to the faith of Jesus, who had never before heard of the name of Luther? but his noble and dear words won their hearts over to the reception of the truth; so that, in my opinion, the spiritual songs have contributed not a little to the spread of the Gospel."

It would, however, be a great mistake to attribute the popularity of these hymns altogether to the intrinsic merit of the poetry. There is no originality of thought, no splendid imagery, no play of fancy calculated to attract the reader, whose taste has been formed on the productions of the nineteenth century; but there is a simple beauty, a homely strength and plainness of language, and above all, a scriptural truth, which found their way to every heart in that less refined age. There is also a melody in the verses, which admirably fitted them for Church music. Many of the tunes were composed by Luther himself, and others were selected by him from those touching popular airs in which Germany has been always so rich.

It may not be amiss to hint at a few of the causes, which contributed to the prodigious effect produced by these hymns at the time of the Reformation, as well as to the permanent hold

which they have since kept upon the minds of the German people. The light of the Gospel had by God's grace again risen upon benighted Christendom ; Luther's translation of the Bible was already in the hands of the people, and was read by them with eagerness ; their minds were opening to the light, their hearts were tuned to praise ; but there were no suitable hymns, wherein they could give utterance to their newly awakened feelings. There were indeed hymns of the Ancient Catholic Church, of some merit, and great antiquity, but they were written in Latin ; there were likewise some fine old German hymns, still favourites with the people ; but they were few in number, scattered here and there, and disfigured by Popish additions ; gems of their kind, but dimmed by the dust of ages, and still worse incrustations of Popery.

Luther, himself a great lover of music and poetry, knew too well the influence of these fascinating arts over the susceptible minds of his countrymen, to neglect so powerful a means of advancing the great cause of the Reformation. Accordingly he applied himself vigorously to the task of reviving congregational singing, of which Christendom had been for centuries deprived. In this, as in other stages of his extraordinary

career, he shewed himself to be no rash and reckless innovator, who delighted in pulling down rather than in building up. He carefully sought out and retained whatever was true and valuable. He translated some of the hymns of the Ancient Catholic Church from Latin into German. He altered, improved, and gave a more Christian tone to some of the old hymns already alluded to, sometimes adding a new stanza to the old one with such singular skill, that it seemed always to have belonged to it. Thus these hymns possessed the double advantage of being at one and the same time the cherished relics of antiquity, and the spring flowers of evangelical poetry, which the genial light and warmth of the Reformation had wakened into life. The permission to sing God's praises, as in the primitive ages of the Church, was a precious boon to the people. They who had been so long, in their public worship, the mere spectators of a Latin service which they could not understand, now poured out their hearts in words, which were not only sweet and familiar to their ears, but also pregnant with evangelical truth; no wonder that they learnt to associate them with all that is true, and pure, and holy; no wonder that they treasured them up as sacred deposits, out of