

## Preface to the Babst Hymnal

1545

*Translated by Paul Zeller Strodach*

*Revised by Ulrich S. Leupold*

The most complete and most carefully edited hymnal to appear in Luther's lifetime was published by Valentin Babst in Leipzig in 1545, the year before Luther died. The preface he wrote for it was his last contribution to hymnody. However, he does not seem to have been actively involved in editing this hymnal, for the two mistakes he points out in the preface appear uncorrected in the hymnal.

The German text, *Vorrhede D. Mart. Luth.*, is given in WA 35, 476-477. The following translation is a revision of P. Z. Strodach's translation in PE 6, 293-295. The verse preceding the preface first appeared on the title page of the Klug hymnal of 1543 and was then reprinted on the title page of the Babst hymnal of 1545. The text is given in the bibliographical notes to these hymnals in WA 35, 331-333.

### *A Warning by D. Martin Luther*

Many false masters now hymns indite  
Be on your guard and judge them aright.  
Where God is building his church and word,  
There comes the devil with lie and sword.

### *A New Preface by D. Martin Luther*

The 96th Psalm [;1] says, "Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord all the earth." For in the Old Covenant under the law of Moses, divine service was tedious and tiresome as the people had to offer so many and varied sacrifices of all they possessed, both in house and field. And since they were restive and selfish, they performed this service unwillingly or only for the sake of temporal gain. As the prophet Malachi asks in the first chapter [;10], "Who is there even among you that would shut the doors

for nought or kindle a light on my altar for nothing?" Now with a heart as lazy and unwilling as this, nothing or nothing good can be sung. Heart and mind must be cheerful and willing if one is to sing. Therefore, God abrogated the service that was rendered so indolently and reluctantly, as he in the same place continues: "I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering: for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts" [Mal. 1:10-11].

Thus there is now in the New Testament a better service of God, of which the Psalm [96:1] here says: "Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord all the earth." For God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it. And whoever does not want to sing and speak of it shows that he does not believe and that he does not belong under the new and joyful testament, but under the old, lazy, and tedious testament.

Therefore, the printers do well if they publish a lot of good hymns and make them attractive to the people with **all** sorts of ornamentations: so that they may move them to joy in faith and to gladly sing. In such pleasing fashion the book by Val[en]tin Babst has been prepared. God grant that it may cause great loss and harm to the Roman pope,<sup>2</sup> who through his damned, intolerable, and abominable laws has caused nothing but howling, mourning, and grief in all the world. Amen.

But I must also give this warning: the burial hymn "We Lay this Body in the Grave"<sup>3</sup> bears my name; but it is not mine, and

<sup>1</sup> Babst's hymnal was lavishly fitted with numerous illustrations and decorative designs on every page. It is the finest piece of printing of all the early Lutheran hymnals.

<sup>2</sup> The name of the printer Babst rhymes with the German word for pope: *Pabst*.

<sup>3</sup> "Nun lasst uns den Leib begraben." See p. 331, n. 6.

hereafter it should not be credited to me. Not that **I** condemn it; for it pleases me very much, and a good poet wrote it, one named Johannes Weiss<sup>4</sup> (only that on the sacrament he has come close to the enthusiasts). But **I** will not palm off anyone's work as my own.

And in "From Trouble Deep **I** Cry to Thee"<sup>5</sup> the reading should be: "Everyone must fear thee."<sup>6</sup> Whether by mistake or deliberately, in most books **this** is made to read "everyone must be afraid." For the expression "that thou mayest be feared" [Ps. 130:4] is a Hebrew idiom. Compare Matthew 15 [:9], "In vain they fear<sup>8</sup> me with the commandment of men," and Psalm 14 [:4-5] and Psalm 53 [:4-5], "They have not called upon God. They fear where there is nothing to fear," i.e., they show great humility, and bow and scrape in their worship, which worship **I** do not want. So also here the meaning is this: Since forgiveness of sins cannot be found except with thee, they must cease from all their idolatry and willingly bow and bend before thee, humble themselves, hold thee alone in honor, take their refuge in thee, and serve thee **as** those who live by thy grace and not by their own righteousness, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Luther means Michael Weisse (*cu.* 1480-1534), the great hymn writer and hymnbook editor of the Bohemian Brethren.

<sup>5</sup> Luther refers to the sixth line of the second stanza. See p. 224.

<sup>6</sup> *Des muss dich fürchten jedermann.*

<sup>7</sup> *Des muss sich fürchten jedermann.*

<sup>8</sup> The Masoretic text and the Vulgate version both have "fear" in the Isaiah text (Isa. 29:13) quoted here by Jesus.