

Away in a Manger

And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:7 (NKJV)

This is commonly known as “Luther’s Cradle Hymn.” But did the great German Reformer, Martin Luther, really write the words? Did he sing them by the cradle of his little son, Hans? This a great mystery in hymnology.

In 1887, “Away in a Manger” appeared in a little book of songs entitled *Dainty Songs for Little Lads and Lasses*, published in Cincinnati by the John Church Company. The songbook was compiled by James R. Murray. A notation beneath “Away in a Manger” said: *Luther’s Cradle Hymn (composed by Martin Luther for his children and still sung by German mothers to their little ones.)* Only stanzas one and two were given.

“Away in a manger” quickly became America’s favorite children’s carol, the words being sung to forty-one different tunes! Everyone assumed the poem had been written by the great Reformer, Martin Luther.

Then in 1945, Richard Hill published a fascinating article entitled “Not So Far Away in a Manger” in which he announced he had discovered the first two stanzas of “Away in a Manger,” in an 1885 songbook entitled *Little Children’s Book*, published by German Lutherans in Pennsylvania. No authorship was given. Nor could Hill find any appearance of this carol in German church history or in Luther’s works.

After extensive research, Hill concluded: “It seems essential to lay [aside] once for all the legend that Luther wrote a carol for his children, which no one else knew anything about, until it suddenly turned up in English dress 400 years later in Philadelphia. Luther can well afford to spare the honor.” But he adds, “Although Luther himself had nothing to do with the carol, the colonies of German Lutherans in Pennsylvania almost certainly did.”

So the mystery endures. Who wrote “Away in a Manger”? There were apparently two unknown writers: A German Lutheran in Pennsylvania who wrote the first two stanzas, with another unknown author adding a third verse which first appeared in an 1892 songbook published by Charles H. Gabriel.

Well, who cares? Certainly not the generations of children around the world who have come to love and know the little Jesus through this sweet carol, and who have gone to sleep praying:

*I love thee, Lord Jesus; look down from the sky
and stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.*