



Savior of the Nations, Come

Text: St. Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397)

Tune: *Geistliches Gesangbüchlein*, Wittenberg, 1524

“Savior of the Nations, Come” is perhaps one of the greatest Advent and Christmas hymns of the Church. Originally written by St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (northern Italy), it was later translated into German by Martin Luther. The English version which we know is a translation of Luther’s.

Ambrose was born in Treves around the year 339. After his father’s death in 353 the family moved to Rome, where Ambrose received his education in law and the Greek language. His proficiency in law was noted the Prefect of Italy, who gave Ambrose a position in his court. In 374 he became Consular of Liguria, which caused his move to Milan. While he was living in Milan, the bishop died. When attempting to elect a new bishop, the court soon became disorderly. Ambrose called for order and instructed the crowds. Soon many were calling for Ambrose to be bishop.



An ancient mosaic of Ambrose.

However, he was only a catechumen and not yet Baptized, so he was Baptized and on December 7, 374 was made bishop. Just one year after becoming bishop, he entered into a battle with the Arian party that lasted most of his life. The Arians taught that Jesus was a man, but denied His divinity. To combat the Arian heresy, Ambrose wrote several hymns to help teach the people the Christian doctrine. For this, Ambrose is often referred to as “the father of Church song.” His musical work was continued by St. Gregory, after whom Gregorian chant is named. Ambrose died on Easter Eve, 397.

The tune, NUN KOMM, DER HEIDEN HEILAND, has become a favorite in the Church. J.S. Bach adapted this melody in several works. Three Advent cantatas, BWV 36 (*Schwingt freudig euch empor*) and BWV 61 and 62 (*Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*) all use the melody and parts of the text. Bach also set several organ arrangements of this tune. The most remarkable is BWV 61, which uses part of *How Lovely Shines the Morning Star*, ending the cantata with the last half of the last stanza, which is “Amen, amen! Come and meet me! Quickly greet me! With deep yearning, Lord, I look for Thy returning.” The use of this text highlights the great joy of Advent and Christmas, looking for Christ’s second coming to take His redeemed children to their eternal joys of heaven.

The original hymn as written by Ambrose and translated by Luther has eight stanzas. ☒ *e Lutheran Hymnal* only included seven stanzas. The missing stanza is:

Latin

*Procedit e thalamo suo
Pudoris aulo regia
Gemina gigans substantia
Alacris ut currat viam.*

German

*Er ging aus der Kammer sein,
Dem kön'glichen Saal so rein
Gott von Art und Mensch ein Held
Sein'n Weg er zu laufen eilt.*

English

Then stepped forth the Lord of all
From His pure and kingly hall;
God of God, yet fully man
His heroic course began.

This hymn is a perfect Advent and Christmas hymn. It captures the spirit of the two seasons, teaching the full divinity of Christ along with His full humanity. However, this is not just an academic exercise, a dogmatic statement to prove a point, but it teaches the comfort of Christ’s humanity and divinity. Stanza four begins to capture the joy of Christ’s two natures: because Christ is fully God and man, He is “captive leading death and hell” while stanza five teaches that He “hast o’er sin the victory won.” Only one who is fully God and fully man can give this comfort, the peace of sin forgiven. For this, we praise the Triune God and long to see the glories of Christ’s Kingdom and forever “high the song of triumph swell!”