

DAVID'S HARP



IN

SONG AND STORY,

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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“The Harp the Hebrew minstrel swept,
The King of Men, the loved of Heaven,
Which Music hallow'd while she wept
O'er tones her heart of hearts had given,
Redoubled be her tears, its chords are riven !
It soften'd men of iron mold,
It gave them virtues not their own ;
No ear so dull, no soul so cold,
That felt not, fired not to the tone,
Till David's lyre grew mightier than his throne.”
—Byron.

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least, if not the expressed idea. For without it, surely it would be but an Icarian flight thus to approach, on self-made waxen wings, the burning Sun of Righteousness.

Now turn we to a strain similar in its leading thought, but from that older Psalmody in which the Christian soul will ever find something for all its wants. It is from the once desponding author of the Seventy-third Psalm—the man “whose feet were almost gone, whose steps had well nigh slipped.” He was falling into an abyss of skepticism in respect to the divine providence; he was confounded by the prosperity of evil men, until he learned wisdom by going into the sanctuary of God. Such was his method of approaching the Infinite Help, and this was the way in which a sense of the adored presence affected his soul:

“ Yea, surely it is good for me
That I draw near to God.
In God I trust that all my works
I may declare abroad.

“ Thou, with thy counsel, while I live,
Wilt me uphold and guide;
And to the glory afterward
Receive me to abide.

“ Whom have I in the heavens high
But thee, O Lord, alone?
And in the earth, whom I desire
Besides thee, there is none.

“ My flesh and soul doth faint and fail,
But God doth fail me never;
For of my heart God is the strength,
My portion sure forever.”

It is the most lowly dependence—a seeking to get hold of the hand that holds us (see Philip. 3:12, in the Greek). This is expressed in another verse, more irregular than the rest, notwithstanding a few slight emendations:

“ Nevertheless, continually,
O Lord, I am with thee;
By my right hand, lest I should fall,
Secure thou holdest me.”

The question is left with the reader. But the writer would not shrink from expressing the opinion that there is something unsound in that religion which would prefer the popular hymn to the ancient Psalm, even in a rhythmical dress so plain as that which is given in this old Scottish version.

The second article is a Memorial presented to the Presbytery of Detroit by Dr. George Duffield, of Detroit, in 1856. It was read by him and was no doubt the expression of his own sentiments. The Presbytery adopted the Me-

morial, and it was sent to the General Assembly of the New School Church, which met in New York City that year.

The "Present Collection," to which the Memorial refers, was the "Church Psalmist," which had been prepared by Dr. N. S. Beman, and was recommended by the Assembly of 1843.

The movement which called forth the Memorial from Detroit was that initiated by the New School Assembly of 1855, to purchase the Church Psalmist, that the Assembly might own it and enjoy the profits from its sale. The Memorial expressed the desire of a large number of Presbyterian ministers of that day to have a more faithful rendering of the Psalms of David than they had in Watts' Psalms.

MEMORIAL.

It is not the object of this memorial to disparage the merits of the present collection, or insinuate aught unfavorable to it, or to the extreme care that has been taken to give it poetic excellence according to the taste and views of the distinguished compiler.

So far as lyrical odes were a part of the collection, we doubt not that poetic taste and spiritual piety have been advantageously blended in the present collection, which is especially characterized by the absence of a class of hymns found in many others, by no means sufficiently elevated and dignified, either in conception or language, to be adapted to the purposes of praise to God by a worshiping assembly. Lyrical poetry claims to excite and express emotion, but the emotions appropriate to lyrical song are not all those of which the heart is susceptible and which it is the province of religious worship on different occasions to induce and indulge. Epic, pastoral and didactic poetry all find appropriate place in spiritual song. Some of the Psalms of David furnish admirable specimens of each. This inestimable collection, made by the Spirit of God, possesses a worth and power far beyond anything to be found in Watts' Imitation, or any other collection of sacred songs, the production of uninspired men. These collections have served the purposes of evangelical religion in many important respects; but the numerous changes that have been made in the Psalmody of different evangelical Churches prove that they have not fully met the wants of the members or the purposes of sacred song. The experience of a few years has demonstrated the defectiveness of our own; and the change introduced into it in that portion which purports to be (as Dr. Watts claimed for his) an imitation or paraphrase of the Psalms of David, we think has been an imperfection instead of an improvement. None of them can claim to be translations and but few of them paraphrases of the Psalms of David. There is a depth, a power, an unction, a reach, a grandeur, a comprehensiveness and sublimity in the Psalmody of the Bible which we look for in vain in Watts' Imitation or any other imitators.

We would not wish to see the latter wholly excluded from our col-

lection, for they have become embalmed in the recollections and incorporated with the pious exercises and breathings of many devout worshippers. But we see no reason why they should occupy a prime and conspicuous place, as though they were the Psalms of David or actually do express their identical thoughts. They might much more appropriately be distributed under their respective suitable heads among the hymns or spiritual songs to which they more properly and characteristically belong. The wants and feelings of very many, as well as great and important benefits that cannot be secured by the existing imitations, would be much more directly and efficiently met and gratified by a restoration of the Book of Psalms to its proper place, and, as we think, the design assigned to it by the Spirit of God, as a part and parcel of the acknowledged matter for the Church's praise in her worshipping assemblies.

There is a simplicity, a pathos, a power and grandeur in most if not all of this sacred collection which gives it incalculable value. Its use, we think, is eminently calculated to preserve the purity of doctrine, to promote the power of faith, to exalt the authority of the sacred Scriptures and to secure respect for their inspiration. Its value and importance have been proved abundantly in the early history of the Reformation; and to the place the Psalter still occupies in the rituals of different Churches may be referred much of that respect for the institutions of religion and the Word of God which are found among them. The experiment of excluding the Book of Psalms from the matter of the congregation's praise has been made extensively in this country by all Protestant denominations but the Episcopalians and a few minor sects of Presbyterians—Covenanters and Seceders.

The frequent changes and enlargement of the collection of hymns in different Churches must not, we think, be referred so much to the love of novelty as to the consciousness that there are defects and wants to be supplied in every collection that has been adopted.

Comparatively few hymns are treasured up in the memory by Christian people generally, and prove always to be acceptable without palling upon the taste or becoming trite. It is singular and pre-eminently characteristic of the Book of Psalms, even where the translation has been made into doggerel rhyme, as in Rous's version, that the sentiment gives value to the language, and its frequent, yea continual and even exclusive use as the material for public praise, is not only agreeable but zealously cherished and contended for as the very thing which best meets and supplies the purposes and wants of a Christian people's praise.

The young may desire and call for poetic compositions in which sentiment is less regarded than splendor of imagery and beauty of language. But where sentiment is secondary and style and ornament of chief importance, the poetry that may be consecrated for the purposes of religious worship will not long retain its freshness and power to interest the minds and hearts of the devout who seek communion with the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. It is the thought itself, the grand and sublime, the tender and touching, the thrilling and effecting truth of redemption through Christ, and the coming glories of his coming and kingdom, that give to the Book of Psalms its value and power when intelligently employed for purposes of religious praise. The person, work, character and affecting scenes and incidents in the life of Christ, the glorious Messiah, his sorrows and sufferings, his trials and conflicts and his atoning death, the wonders of his resurrection, ascension and exaltation to the right hand of the Father Al-

mighty, the progress and history, the distresses and persecutions, the triumph and glory of the Church, the gracious retributive providences of Jesus Christ, his supremacy and Lordship over this lower creation, and the bright scenes of joy and blessedness at his coming in his kingdom which enliven the Book of Psalms, are themes that can never prove stale and uninteresting to the Christian heart. The longer the sentiments of this Book have been studied and used for purposes of praise and supplication in the worship of God, the dearer does it become to the pious heart, and the contrast between it and other hymns becomes glaring in point of strength and richness, of grandeur and power to enlighten, confirm and invigorate the Christian faith and hope, and lift the heart up to the holy joy and conscious, dignified and triumphing communion with God.

For these and other reasons not necessary to be stated, we would respectfully urge the attention of the General Assembly and their committee to the subject of enriching our psalmody by the introduction of the Psalter, or Book of Psalms, as rendered in our common prose translation, but arranged according to Hebrew parallelism, so as to admit of their being chanted. The parallelism which forms a conspicuous feature of Hebrew poetry seems to have been specially adapted, if not designed, for this sort of music. * * *

Dr. Watts was himself greatly in error as to the views he took of the spirit and design of the Book of Psalms, which led him to style many of them "cursing Psalms," and represent them to be unsuitable to the Christian spirit. The future tense indicates often mere prophetic character, and the imperative mood judged by him as inappropriate to the Christian, when employed by the Saviour whom the literal David personated, possesses a deep significancy and gives a point and power to the denunciation contained in many of the Psalms by no means inconsistent with, but corroborative of, the faith and hopes and spirit of the evangelical worshiper. An intelligent use of the Book of Psalms for purposes of religious worship could not fail to guard congregations against the influx and influence of dangerous error and keep before the mind the glorious Saviour who apprised his disciples that "all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Book of Psalms concerning him." Luke 24 : 44.