

The Psalms in Worship

A SERIES OF CONVENTION PAPERS BEARING
UPON THE PLACE OF THE PSALMS IN
THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH

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THE PSALMS IN THE POST-APOSTOLIC CHURCH

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THE range of inquiry permitted in this paper is somewhat indefinite, inasmuch as the phrase, "The Post-Apostolic Church," is rather elastic in its application. It is a widespread and warrantable usage to designate the Church from the day of Pentecost, or rather of the resurrection of Jesus, till the close of the first century as "The Apostolic Church"; because till nearly the latter date it enjoyed direct Apostolic supervision. Since the removal of the Apostles the Church might literally be denominated Post-Apostolic. In fact, however, the limitation of this title to the Church of the second and third centuries of our era prevails; although a disposition is not uncommon to stretch the title so as to embrace three or four centuries later. In these circumstances I shall avail myself of all the latitude allowed by custom, or claimed by the explorers of the past, and jot down with brevity a series of observations descriptive of the place held by the Psalms in the Church from the close of the first century down even till the eighth or ninth century of the Christian era.

1. During the period indicated the Book of Psalms was recognized as a part of Holy Scripture. Proof of this position can be presented copiously, but, in the interest of brevity, is here withheld. It may, however, be mentioned as evidence of the prominent place accorded by the ancient Church to the Psalms that in a volume which lies before me of the works of Augustine there are 664 quotations from the Old Testament, or references to it, and that 281 of these attach to the Book of Psalms. It may be added that in the Early Church the fullest recognition of the inspired character of this Book prevailed.

2. In the period covered by our present survey the Psalms were not only read like other parts of Scripture, but also sung. It was perceived that this was one end, and indeed the distinctive end, for which the Book had been provided, and that to neglect to *sing* the Psalms was to disregard at once a duty and a privilege. From the accounts given by the ancient writers we conclude that the Psalms were in their days extensively sung even when there was no thought of engaging in the solemn exercise of worship, but when the purpose was to meditate on the Word of God, or to make others hear the truth embodied in the incomparable spiritual songs of the Psalter. History tells how in the early stages of the Reformation in France the singing of Clement Marot's metrical version of certain Psalms became for a season a prevalent pastime in which princes, nobles, and peasants shared, and this, too, when there was no intention to render the sacrifice of formal praise to God. In the marvelous movement by which of late Wales and, to some extent, England were affected, the singing of religious hymns was widespread among the people at their daily work and in hours of leisure, when there was no intention to engage in direct acts of worship. Exactly similar was the impulse in the Early Church to awaken the echoes with the sound of Psalms chanted in a devout spirit, yet without the purpose of rendering the sacrifice of formal praise to God. Thus, in his Sixth Homily on Repentance, the famous preacher, Chrysostom, who lived at the close of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century, extols the Psalms above all the rest of Scripture and tells that they were sung by all classes of men in all places and on all occasions, not only in church meetings, but in funeral exercises, by virgins as they plied the needle, by the ignorant who could not read, yet could repeat David's Psalms by heart. "David," says he, "is always in their mouths, not only in the cities and churches, but in courts, in monasteries, in deserts, and the wilderness. He turned earth into heaven and men into angels, being adapted to all orders and to all capacities."

3. In the Post-Apostolic Church the Psalms were not only sung, but sung in the solemn worship of God. As already suggested, there is a difference between singing a Psalm as an exercise of edification and singing it as an exercise of divine worship; just as there is a difference between reading the Lord's Prayer, even reverently, and offering it as a prayer to God. While the distinction indicated is both just and important, it is beyond reasonable doubt that after the Apostolic age the Psalms were both privately and publicly sung by Christians in the direct and solemn worship of God. Overwhelming evidence to this effect is found in the writings of Chrysostom, Augustine, Jerome, and many others. In the East and in the West, in Asia, Europe, and Africa, wherever the religion of Christ found place, this custom of singing Psalms in the worship of God prevailed. It was felt then, as it should be felt now, that the distinctive object for which the Psalter had been provided is that it might be used in worship; that to read this part of Scripture is not enough; but that in addition it is to be sung, or chanted, as a part of worship. And that these songs of Zion were so used from the Apostolic age onward through the centuries till the Great Reformation is too well attested to be denied.

4. There is no clear evidence that in the second century of our era any songs but those of the inspired and divinely authorized Psalter were used in worship by the orthodox. If songs additional were used, what has become of them? Surely some of them that had been in the mouth of martyrs in that age of persecution must have survived, being treasured in the hearts and memories of fellow-Christians who outlived the scenes of fiery trial. Yet when we ask for them, not one can be produced. Even Dr. Schaff, one of the most erudite ecclesiastical historians and most enthusiastic hymnologists, is forced to admit that from this period no hymn, aside from the Psalms, has come down to us, unless it be some snatches derived from Scripture, especially from the first two chapters of the Gospel according to Luke. In vol. ii., eighth edition, page 226, of his "History of the

Christian Church," we find the following words: "The Church inherited the Psalter from the synagogue, and has used it in all ages as an inexhaustible treasury of devotion. The Psalter is truly catholic in its spirit and aim; it springs from the deep fountains of the human heart in its secret communion with God, and gives classic expression to the religious experience of all men in every age and tongue. This is the best proof of its inspiration. Nothing like it can be found in all the poetry of heathendom." (Dr. Schaff might have added, or in all the poetry of Christendom.) "The Psalter was first enriched by the inspired hymns which saluted the birth of the Saviour of the world, the *Magnificat* of Mary, the *Benedictus* of Zacharias, the *Gloria in Excelsis* of the heavenly host, and the *Nunc Dimittis* of the aged Simeon. These hymns passed at once into the service of the Church, to resound through all successive centuries as things of beauty which are 'a joy forever.'"

The same author, notwithstanding his ardor as an advocate of the use of an uninspired hymnology, is frank enough to add, "The oldest Christian poem preserved to us which can be traced to an individual author is from the pen of the profound Christian philosopher, Clement of Alexandria, who taught theology in that city before 202 A. D. It is a sublime, but somewhat turgid, song of praise to the Logos as the divine educator and leader of the human race, and, though not intended and adapted for public worship, is remarkable for its spirit and antiquity."

Proof that other compositions than the Psalms were sung in worship by Christians soon after the Apostolic age is supposed by some to be found in a letter written early in the second century, probably 112 A. D., by Pliny, the Younger, to the Emperor Trajan. Pliny, who was governor of Bithynia, a province of Asia Minor, wrote to his imperial master the letter referred to, giving an account of some troubles which had arisen in connection with the Christian movement. The part of this letter which concerns us now is that in which the writer describes the habits of the Christian sect, particularly where he states that they

were wont "to assemble on a fixed day before it was light and to sing among themselves alternately [or responsively] a hymn to Christ as to a god." From this the inference is drawn that other hymns than those of the Psalter were at an early stage in the history of the New Testament Church used in its worship. This inference, however, is very unwarrantable; for we hold, and it was a prevalent sentiment of the ancient Church, that in the Psalms Christ is extolled as God.

Another item advanced to prove the use of uninspired songs in worship in the Early Church consists of a quotation made by Eusebius, the historian, from a lost treatise attributed to Caius, a Roman presbyter, to this effect: "All the psalms and songs written by the faithful from the beginning celebrate Christ, the Word of God, ascribing divinity to Him." Touching this quotation it may suffice to remark that the expression, "from the beginning," may mean, and, we think, does most naturally mean, from the origin of sacred song. On this supposition Caius simply declares, what we affirm, that in the Psalms Christ is extolled as God. The use of the word "psalms" lends countenance to this view.

The early use of uninspired hymns in the Post-Apostolic Church has been inferred from the terms used by the Council of Antioch (270 A. D.), in the charge which it made against the pompous and powerful bishop, Paul of Samosata, that he had banished the hymns wont to be sung in honor of Christ and introduced instead hymns extolling himself. Our limits forbid a thorough discussion of this plea; but we would briefly say that it has again and again (and never more clearly than by Dr. William Wishart, of our Church, in a newspaper article) been proved to be not only valueless for the purpose for which it is adduced, but even adverse to that end.

5. There is good reason to believe that the first to introduce uninspired hymns in worship were errorists, who sought by this means to diffuse their peculiar tenets. To this device Valentinian, a Gnostic, resorted with the purpose of giving currency

to his heterodox sentiments. This charge is brought against him by Tertullian, who flourished in the early part of the third century. The Syrian Church was afflicted at an early date with hymns produced by Bardesanes, and his son, Harmonius, in the interest of the fantastic speculations of Gnosticism.

At a later date, when the Arian heresy arose, the same method was extensively employed for promoting its spread. In the streets and in worshiping assemblies hymns imbued with Arian sentiments and set to catching music were extensively sung. The Psalms were not adapted to serve the ends of those who were engaged in a war against the dignity of Christ. Recourse was, therefore, had to the preparation and use of hymns for the diffusion of Arian doctrine. The same expedient is employed in modern times, when various sects, deserting the one central, ecumenical hymn-book, furnish themselves with hymn-books framed to express and propagate their respective tenets.

6. It is beyond question that one effect of the adoption of hymns by the heterodox, as a vehicle of their views, was to induce the orthodox to resort to the same expedient for the defense and dissemination of truth. For instance, in the Syrian Church Ephraim, commonly called "Ephraem Syrus," who died 379 A. D., wrote a large number of hymns to counteract the baleful influence of those put into circulation by Bardesanes and Harmonius aforementioned; and these controversial odes soon began to be used in the worship of that Church. In like manner in the early part of the fourth century the propagation of Arian views by hymns gave rise to a counter-movement on the part of the orthodox in the form of hymns extolling Christ as God. So also Augustine, an intense lover of the Psalms, was induced to prepare a hymn after the model of the One Hundred and Nineteenth Psalm in order to cope with the Donatists, who were diligently diffusing their tenets by means of hymns. Thus it may be said that by good motives the orthodox in the Post-Apostolic times were led to take steps which issued in the supplanting of the God-given Psalmody by uninspired effusions.

7. Even in the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Church, freed from persecution, developed rapidly in the direction of pomp and show, the Psalms held their place in worship with wonderful tenacity. They were deemed so important that candidates for the ministry were required to commit them to memory. In North Africa, with which the great name of Augustine is so closely associated, they seem to have been almost exclusively used, unless by the Donatists. In the East, as Chrysostom with glowing eloquence attests, they were sung by Christians enthusiastically. John Cassian, an ardent promoter of the monkish system, who died 450 A. D., left behind him a book descriptive of the discipline of the monks under his care, first in Egypt and afterwards at Massilia (now Marseilles), in the South of France. From this volume we learn that for a time the monks were accustomed to sing eighteen or twenty Psalms, or even more, in succession. At length, however, it was arranged that the number sung at each service, morning and evening, should be twelve.

8. The displacement of the Psalms by uninspired hymns, so far as this occurred, was not accomplished without resistance, and that especially in those sections of the Church where pure doctrine lingered longest. A few facts corroborative of this statement are here subjoined.

One of the courageous opponents of declension in the Church was Vigilantius, against whom Jerome (340-420 A. D.) directed some of his coarse sneers. One of these seems to imply that Vigilantius was devoted to the Psalms; for, after denouncing him as an antagonist of monkery, of relic-worship, of the observance of saints' days, and of prayers for the dead, Jerome flings at him the reproach that "amidst jovial feasting he would only entertain himself with the Psalms of David."

It is worthy of note that protests against the employment of uninspired hymns in worship continued to be made when the light of truth was fast fading away and the gloom of Romish apostasy was settling down, as a pall; and that this antagonism was most strenuous in those regions where resistance to the ad-

vancing tide of corruption was most determined. In the North of Italy along the great Alpine range, in the North of Spain, where stretches the rugged range of the Pyrenees, and in the South of France, where at a later day bloody crusades, organized by popes, were hurled against the poor people who held the truth, repugnance to mere human hymns and attachment to the Psalms as matter of praise lingered latest.

The tract of country just indicated might be called "the evangelical belt" during the dark centuries, where the truth found a shelter when driven from other parts. Of this region that valiant Vigilantius aforementioned was a native. Here also lived and labored Claude, or Claudius, a Spaniard, who, as bishop of Turin, contended boldly against the rapidly growing tendency to the invocation of saints and the worship of images and relics, together with other forms of superstition. Here also we find Agobard, archbishop of Lyons (who died 841 A. D.), maintaining a heroic struggle against the growing superstition and expressing his desire that in worship no songs should be used except those found in the Psalter, or, at least, in the Bible.

As further evidence of the spirit which survived in this comparatively orthodox region it may be stated that in a provincial council held in Braga in Portugal, in the year 563, it was decreed that "beside the Psalms or canonical Scriptures nothing be sung in the churches." About the date of this council a strong effort was in progress looking toward the admission into the church services of hymns composed by influential bishops, particularly Ambrose and Hilary; and hence in another council, or synod, held in Toledo in Spain in the year 633, the question of permitting in the church services the use of hymns was brought forward. By this time the innovators had gained in strength, and they secured a decision favorable to their cause. It is clear, however, from the action of the Toledo Council that hymns had till then, at least in Spain, been mere beggars for admission; for, in the argument to sustain its action, the Council does not assert that any collection of uninspired hymns had ever been used in the

church services, but only that it had been customary to sing the doxology and a few Scripture canticles chiefly pertaining to the birth of Christ. The Council could point to no hymn-book that had been sanctioned by the Church as a substitute for the Psalter, or a rival of it. And here it may be mentioned as a kindred suggestive fact that in the record of the terrible Diocletian persecution in the early years of the fourth century, a persecution directed against the books, as well as against the bodies, of the Christians, while reference is often made to the seizure of copies of the Bible and of the Psalms, no hint is given of the capture of a hymn-book or of a prayer-book.

In closing this paper, a few sentences, chiefly of recapitulation, may be allowed:

First: It is beyond reasonable doubt that in the early centuries after the disappearance of the Apostles the Psalms constituted the chief hymn-book of the Church.

Second: There is no clear evidence that before the end of the second century uninspired hymns were employed in worship by the orthodox.

Third: Considering that even during the time of the Apostles grave irregularities existed in the Church, it would not be wonderful if in the department of song improprieties had arisen.

Fourth: The promoters of heresy were the leaders in the production and introduction of hymns.

Fifth: The desire to counteract error contributed to the production of hymns and the employment of them in worship.