

The Psalms in Worship

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

EDITED BY

JOHN McNAUGHER, D.D., LL.D.

Professor of New Testament Literature and Criticism in the
Allegheny Theological Seminary



PITTSBURGH

The United Presbyterian Board of Publication

1907

COPYRIGHT 1907 BY
THE UNITED PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION
PITTSBURGH, PA.

PSALM VERSIFICATION—THE UNIFORM METRICAL PSALTER

BY THE REV. J. C. K. MILLIGAN, D. D., NEW YORK, N. Y.

THE more than five years given to the work of translating the Psalms in meter have been a labor of love, a time of delightful fellowship with Christian brethren, and they have deepened the conviction that the Psalms, and the Psalms alone, are worthy to be the praise songs in the worship of the Lord our God.

Authority to translate the Psalms, or any Scripture, into a local vernacular comes from the fact that Jesus and the Apostles quoted the Old Testament mainly from the Greek translation, and not from the original Hebrew. The corrections they made in that translation warrant the revision of existing translations whenever a more accurate rendering can be given.

What, then, is the authority of a translation? The right to use an approved, though imperfect, translation as an ordinarily sufficient copy of the Word of God is undoubted; but it has no ultimate authority except as it expresses the precise thought of the original. The only authoritative translation of the Old Testament is found in the quotations made of it by Jesus and the Apostles in the New Testament; and there is no authoritative translation of the New Testament. A translation of the Psalms must follow the light so largely shed on them by the New Testament; and it will have the authority that the scholarship and fidelity of the translator give it, and nothing more. Hence there is always a final appeal to the original; and the best translation should be improved as defects are found, as linguistic attainments increase, as historical illustrations are discovered, as Christian experience is enlightened by careful study of the text, and as

providential calls come with the promised aid of the Holy Spirit: "It shall be given you in that hour what ye shall say, and how ye shall speak."

Translations of the Psalms have been specially provided for popular use from the earliest Reformation periods. Beza, the colleague and successor of Calvin, made a translation of the Psalms that became the psalmody of the French-speaking Churches, the music having been chiefly furnished by Marot. This praise service was accompanied by marked manifestations of the converting and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit and of the presence of the Lord Jesus, as He promised in the Great Commission given to His Church. Especially in the French, German, and English Versions, the Psalms have been as constant and helpful factors in the propagation of Christianity as any part of the New Testament; and, in exemplifying the life and power of godliness which Jesus and the Apostles inculcated, they have held an honored place and exerted a remarkable influence. "The Psalms in Human Life," by Rowland E. Prothero, has passed through many editions. In it the author, after extensive research, gives this testimony to the incomparable worth of the Psalms. "More than any other book, the Psalms have influenced human life and action, have inspired writers for their best work, have been the most familiar to the great men of all time, have most comforted humanity in times of trial, and have been most intimately associated with the momentous events of history. With the singing of Psalms the Pilgrim Fathers set sail in the *Mayflower*; the Bay Psalm Book was the third book printed in America; till the end of the eighteenth century the Psalms were exclusively sung in the Churches; in 1787 Benjamin Franklin, quoting Psalm cxxvii., moved that the Convention that was framing a Constitution for the United States should offer prayer for divine aid in their difficult work. If you could have only one book, many would say: The one book would be the Psalms, in which is included, as Heine says, 'The whole drama of humanity.'"

The old Scottish Version, with its antiquated style and quaint expressions, was a marvelous product of Christian scholarship and poetic skill. It laid the foundation for all the recent attempts to make and revise our translations.

Sternhold and Hopkins was used for a long period as the best rendering then given to the Psalms. One of its verses in the Eighteenth Psalm is often quoted as an inspiration in declaring the majesty of the Lord and His unfailing oversight and care of all parts of the universe :

“On cherub and on cherubim
Full royally He rode;
And on the wings of mighty winds
Went flying all abroad.”

The Anglicans superseded this version by Tate and Brady, which still holds a large place in their services. Mr. Francis Rous made a complete new translation of the Psalms, and on account of its merits it was proposed in Scotland as a substitute for Sternhold and Hopkins. Before accepting it the Scottish Assembly referred it to a committee, whose changes and original renderings converted it into a really new version, though it is often incorrectly called Rous' Version. The Irish Presbyterian Churches and all the American Psalm-singing Churches until a few years ago used this version exclusively. But its many antiquated words and phrases, its imperfect rhymes and measures, the almost exclusive use of common meter, and occasional mis-translations, led to frequent efforts by private individuals and Church committees to revise it and provide new versions in a variety of meters. In Scotland it is still used in its unchanged form, the smaller Churches using it exclusively, and the larger using both Psalms and hymns. Their attitude is shown by the following action taken in 1905 by the various Assemblies: The English Presbyterian Synod resolved not to adopt the Hymnary prepared by the Irish Assembly and the United Free Church of Scotland, but to improve “Church Praise,” its own

selection of Psalms and hymns. The Church of Scotland by a large majority rejected a motion to coöperate with other Churches in revising the metrical Psalms in ordinary use, on the ground that the present Version, with all its defects, was interwoven with the very religious life of the Scottish people. The United Free Assembly, on the recommendation of the Committee on Praise, "did not think itself called on to approve of the New Metrical Version of the Psalms, which had been prepared by brethren in the United States." The Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland passed an act rescissory repealing the different Acts of Assembly permitting the use of hymns and instrumental music, so that the use of these in the Free Church is now prohibited.

After the organization of the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1858, almost the first work was arrangements for the revision of the Scottish Psalter; and in 1871 the completed Book was adopted with substantial unanimity. In a conservative spirit the Common Meter Version was preserved, but it was thoroughly amended, and over one hundred and forty new versions were prepared in a variety of meters, making it a worthy vehicle of praise for the sanctuary, the prayer-meeting, and the Christian family. In 1879 the Irish Assembly adopted a Revision, making fewer emendations, retaining many of the defects, and adding a few original translations of excellent character. The American Reformed Presbyterian Synod in 1889 also issued a Revised Version that aimed to remove defects and eliminate the many paraphrases of the old Psalter.

Thus four Versions of the Psalms brought confusion into the praise service, and led to the desirability of a Uniform Metrical Translation that would be accepted by all Christians as the divine Psalter, the one Church Hymnal.

This movement for a Uniform Psalter was started in 1893, and after much correspondence nine Churches in Canada and the United States agreed to undertake the work. A Joint Committee of twenty-three members, ministers representing the dif-

ferent Church Assemblies, were selected to carry forward the work to an early and harmonious conclusion. The first meeting of this Joint Committee for actual work was held in New York City in 1901, though months had been previously given to preparation for the laborious task. For five years the Committee diligently prosecuted their responsible effort to versify the inspired Psalter, make it acceptable to the entire Christian Church, and thus unify and perfect the praises of the Lord according to His own appointment. The members privately studied to secure the true translation, the most suitable meter, the best poetic expression for the exact thought of the text, the correct accent of every word, and a natural rhyme. The whole Committee met twice a year to compare the results of private study, consider and decide upon proposed renderings, and, if possible, reach unanimous conclusions. Nine public sessions of the Committee were held, continuing for about ten hours a day for ten or fifteen days at each session. Their Revision was completed in New York, April, 1905, and is now before the Churches for examination.

The difficulties in the way of Psalm versification are neither few nor small. The Committee were charged to keep close to the original text, to conform to the language of the Authorized and Revised translations, to avoid extended paraphrases, to provide a variety of meters, and to express the inspired thought with chasteness and elegance of style in accordance with modern standards and tastes. It has been well said that a translation "must not be so literal as to convert rich prose into poor verse, not so faithful as to be punctilious in interpretations, nor yet bound to the Hebrew idioms, while preserving the precise form and color of the inspired sentiment."

Hebrew poetry has neither rhyme nor meter, and to introduce them without marring the text compels poetic license for defects in both. Hebrew parallelisms differ greatly in the fulness or brevity of the truth expressed; but every line must fit the poetic measure, and something must be omitted or added to the original. But how much of the text may be omitted, or how much padding

may be inserted without departing from a faithful translation? An exact metrical reproduction of the original is impossible; and a word-for-word rendering would be neither meter nor a true translation. The Standard American Version says in the Preface: "The conception of the writer is not really reproduced by a literal translation. The Hebrews attributed mental actions or emotions to various physical organs, whereas in English such a trope is limited almost entirely to the heart and brains. . . . The attempt to translate literally from the original has not infrequently led to Hebraisms which had better be avoided, which in some cases must be called bad and outlandish." This is specially true in the translation of poetry in which the Oriental figures of speech abound. The Joint Committee here met their greatest hindrance to harmonious action. Some shuddered at every word of the original that was omitted, and trembled for the Ark when a word or phrase was added to the text; and yet one or the other must be done, or the work would stop. In nearly every case, after careful comparison of views, the form closest to the exact thought of the original was followed, and the truth of the text was retained without sectarian bias. The names of nations hinder the use of Psalms lxxxiii. and lxxxvii. Is it essential to retain these names, and sing such a verse as this:

"Gebal, and Ammon, Amalek,
Philistia, those of Tyre,
And Assur joined with them; to help
Lot's children they conspire"?

The Committee retained some names to show the history referred to, and instead of the others made it, "The nations far and near," including the hostile peoples of to-day with those of the past. In the Eighty-Seventh Psalm the names are given literally, but all in one central verse, which may be omitted and the thought retained.

The divine names are most important, as they designate the true God, His Being and unsearchable character. Each name

is a distinct description, an added revelation of His Person and perfections, a new view of the depth and height of the Infinite God, our Saviour; and the name used by the inspired writer is exactly the character that the Holy Spirit there desires to be the matter of our praise. If we omit or change the name given by the Psalmist, or add a name, we change the divine thought for a poetic fancy, and substitute our idea in its place. To insert a name of God to make a rhyme or fill out a measure is not due reverence. In a few exigencies of rhyme or meter the Uniform Psalter fails to give the precise name, but no other Version is so exact except the American Revision, which restores the Memorial Name, Jehovah, in every place from which Jewish superstition removed it. Jehovah is so often Jesus, "Whose name every tongue should confess," that this name might well be represented by "Jesus" instead of "Lord" or "God"; and the use of that precious name would make the Psalms more acceptable to a multitude of Christians, and would obey the divine injunction, "whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus."

The Committee favored a single version for each Psalm because a unity of rendering seemed essential as a standard translation and for uniformity in worship; but a few second versions were added when a free rendering had been adopted, or when a precious old version was retained with its defects, as Psalms xxiii., c., ciii., etc. Doubtless hymn-singing Churches will add hymns to the Psalter, and Psalm-singing Churches will add some of their own preferred versions. There is a reason for more than one version: a metrical rendering cannot always be as exact as the prose, and an idea of the original that is not clearly expressed in one meter may be brought out in another; besides, the meter adopted in one version may be more acceptable and give the Book additional favor and wider use. While the Uniform Version will be used in united services, each denomination may add to it in their own sanctuaries, or even retain the old.

It is not expected that the Uniform Version will at once come

into general use. Recent revisions have removed objections to the old version, and our prejudices and attachments will favor its retention. Hymn-singers have revised their hymnals, have little knowledge of the Joint Committee's work, and no strong preferences for inspired Psalmody. The completed Book is now before the Assemblies of the Churches. An examination must determine its character and its fitness to be the Book of Praise for the Christian Sanctuary. The verdict will depend on its merits and the unprejudiced treatment it receives. Possibly it is too free for us, and too literal for liberal hymn-singers. Examine it closely, and mark all its failings; but consider it mainly as an introduction of the Psalms to those who have long used the hymns exclusively. The Committee earnestly aimed to make it acceptable to all parties, and the merits of the work are specially due to the zeal and ability of our hymn-singing brethren.

The almost unanimous approval of the work by the members of the Joint Committee is no slight testimony to its value, because with few exceptions no adopted rendering of a Psalm is the work of any one of them. Many minds have left their impress on nearly every verse, and the impartial judgment of all has been secured at each step. It is then fair to say that in the judgment of an able body of men, thoroughly acquainted with the work, and reasonably impartial, this Version far exceeds their own highest expectation at the outset and earlier progress of the work. The guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit were manifest at every meeting in difficulties overcome, views harmonized, and results secured. To God be all the glory. The Version is confidently believed to be a more faithful translation, more poetic and smooth in diction, better adapted for the use of the choicest variety of church music, and thus more worthy of approval, than any extant version. It is hopefully commended to the favorable judgment of the Christian Churches, and the blessing of the Lord is devoutly sought in its behalf.