

## Introduction to the New Edition

The integrity of this translation of the Psalms in modern English consists in the mode of its creation: it was made completely anew. Accordingly, it is not a revision of an older version, as were most other modern language psalters of the twentieth century. This version was commissioned in 1972 by the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England with the approval of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and was incorporated in the official *Alternative Services Book* of 1980.

The work in completing this translation lasted eight years. It was undertaken by a panel, convened for the purpose, under the chairmanship of J.A. Emerton, the then Regius Professor of Hebrew in the University of Cambridge<sup>1</sup>. The panel consisted of eight Hebrew specialists and one scholar of English Literature, D.L. Frost. The Hebraists were largely Anglicans but included members of the Roman Catholic, Methodist and United Reform Churches. It is noteworthy that the differences of Christian allegiance did not in any way affect the way in which the problems of translation were tackled.

This translation was intended to be used within churches, as a version which would express the meaning of the psalms clearly in modern English. This translation also benefitted from the fact that study of the language and of the textual problems of the Hebrew Bible had advanced considerably in the preceding decades. More was known about the meanings of Hebrew words and the history of the text of the Hebrew Bible, and techniques had been developed for dealing with obscure passages and verses where it is probable that

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1. See p. xyz for a full list of members of the panel, described in regard to the positions they held in the 1970s, the time of the working sessions.

mistakes were made by scribes copying the text by hand in ancient times.

### **The method deployed by the translation panel**

The first step in preparing the translation was for one of the Hebrew scholars to draft a rendering of a psalm, and for his draft to be discussed and revised by the others. The second draft thus reflected the judgment not just of one scholar but of a team of scholars with a specialized knowledge of Hebrew and of the Old Testament. Such team work was indicative of the breadth of knowledge that was available and precluded the inclusion of fads favoured by individual members. At this stage, the goal was simply to indicate the meaning of the original, rather than to achieve a style acceptable in English or aim for literary elegance. While for the most part the meaning of the Psalms is clear, there are some obscure passages, such as Psalm 87, where the panel was obliged to hazard a translation which seemed to make sense in the context. There are also places where the inability to achieve good sense is a likely result of scribal mistakes in ancient times, and here the translators felt free to make small corrections to the Hebrew text. They were, however, reluctant to make changes except where there was no satisfactory alternative. They were also cautious about accepting new meanings for Hebrew words which were unsupported by reasonable evidence.

The second stage was the responsibility of David Frost. He took the agreed draft and prepared a rendering in an English style and rhythm suitable for use in church. His translation came back to the panel, who were free to criticize it if they thought that it misrepresented the meaning of the Hebrew or if they were dissatisfied with the English wording. They did not themselves alter Frost's version, but asked him to consider their representations and to bring back a revision to the panel. It was thus the aim, on the one hand, to gain the considered opinion of the Hebraists and, on the other, to avoid the flatness of what has been described as 'committee English'.

This process ensured that this translation remains a fresh rendering of the Hebrew into modern English, not a revision of an older version. However, the panel was not inclined to novelty for its own sake, and they were free to make use of many phrases from earlier translations. Moreover, they followed the example of the great translators of

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who reproduced many of the images and idioms of the original Hebrew. Lively expressions modelled on the Hebrew were deemed preferable to tired expressions and clichés drawn from vernacular English. Slight archaisms were deployed in recognition of the fact that the original text came from ancient Israel, but they were tested concerning their intelligibility for those who might have been unfamiliar with them or with older English versions. Every effort was made to render the Psalms into language that ordinary Christians could understand.

### **The Status of the translated Psalms**

The Alternative Service book, in which the Psalms were incorporated, had a run of almost twenty years. In the 1990s, however, the Church of England Commission engaged in further liturgical revision. Where the Psalms were concerned, the Commission proposed to adopt another version, at the time in use by the English Franciscan order. The version was subsequently named *The Psalter 1998*. This decision was curious and somewhat surprising. The translation was originally produced by a committee of the Episcopal Church of the U.S.A in the 1960s, and went through several revisions for successive American prayer books. It is not known whether qualified Hebraists were involved, but the primary purpose seems to have been to revise the familiar Psalms of the *Book of Common Prayer*<sup>2</sup> to accord with the need for modern English and for inclusive language. The poet W.H. Auden, who had been involved in the project, reported in a private communication that he had done his best to preserve as much of the old wording as possible. The version ‘ended up neither Tudor nor modern English but a clumsy hybrid’<sup>3</sup>.

The Commission had resolved, as early as 1971, to give no further consideration to this version in their continuing work of liturgical revision. Yet, by 1997, the version resurfaced as the preferred option for the future official psalter of the Church of England.

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2. This much-loved version, produced by Miles Coverdale in the 1530s, was a translation of a Latin text of the Psalms and not at all a rendering of the Hebrew original.

3. See *A Daft Text*, p.2.

At this stage, three members of the translation panel of the *Liturgical Psalter*, J.A., Emerton, D.L. Frost and A.A. Macintosh<sup>4</sup>, published a detailed criticism of the revived American version. The work included verses from both the psalters in contention, set out side by side. The booklet was entitled<sup>5</sup>, *A Daft Text: the Psalter 1998*<sup>6</sup>.

These and other severe criticisms of the proposed psalter resulted in the Commission inviting two competent Hebraists (A. Gelston and J. Rogerson) to renovate the version, removing all the many glaring mistakes and infelicities. This was akin, as it has been said, to taking over a ramshackle house, renovating it without benefit of professional architects and then calling in professionals to put things right after the event. This is in stark contrast to the translation of *The Liturgical Psalter*, crafted completely *de novo*.

Much of the impetus for the adoption of *The Psalter 1998* arose from the claim that it was closer to Coverdale's version of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Yet examination of the version alongside *The Liturgical Psalter* suggested that *The Psalter 1998* uses 9% more of Coverdale's words than *The Liturgical Psalter*, though it preserves substantially more of his mistranslations<sup>7</sup>.

Despite these concerns, *The Psalter 1998* was formally adopted by the Church of England as the official psalter and incorporated in the definitive *Common Worship* (2000).

*The Liturgical Psalter*, however, remains a version fully authorized for use in the Church of England. It was incorporated in *An Australian Prayer Book* (1978), in an *Alternative Prayer Book* (1984) in the Church of Ireland, and in *An Anglican Prayer Book* in the Church of the Province of South Africa. It has been reprinted in a variety of publications in England and overseas, adopted for use by the Uniting Church of Australia and excerpted for the Methodist *Hymns and Psalms* (1983). In 1996, *The Liturgical Psalter* was extensively excerpted

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4. Two other scholars, members of the panel, who did not take part in composing the booklet, wished their names to be associated with its contents: W. Horbury and E.W. Nicholson.
  5. The title *A Daft Text* derives from a review of the new translation in *News of the Liturgy* (April, 1999). The printer's devil seems to have become here, providentially, a printer's angel.
  6. *A Daft Text: the Psalter 1998*, Aquila Books: Cambridge and Sydney, 1999.
  7. See further, *A Daft Text*, p.4.

in Donald Davie's edition of the Penguin Classics *The Psalms in English*, as one of two versions representative of the twentieth century.

## Publishing History

1977. *The Psalms: A New Translation for Worship*. William Collins and the Church Information Office.

1995. *The Liturgical Psalter (New Inclusive Language Version)*. HarperCollins.

1995. *A Prayer Book for Australia*. Broughton Publishing.

2012. *The Cambridge Liturgical Psalter*<sup>8</sup>. Aquila Books.

1995. Note: A Roman Catholic document *The Liturgical Psalter* (International Consultation on English in the Liturgy) was published using the same name as the original *Liturgical Psalter* of 1977 (as above). The imprimatur for the work was revoked in 1998 by the (R.C.) Church because of 'concerns about the doctrinal accuracy of the translation'. Since the original *Liturgical Psalter* of 1977 is permitted for use in the Church of England, the copyright holders took the opportunity to avoid any possible confusion by renaming the latter *The Cambridge Liturgical Psalter*.

A.A. Macintosh  
Secretary of the Translation Panel

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8. This edition of *The Liturgical Psalter* includes notes written by the Secretary of the translation panel. They were designed to give some account of differences between the new translation and that of Coverdale in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Some comparison has been made with other translations of the Psalms, including, e.g., the *New English Bible*. The notes were written at the request of the Chairman of the Liturgical Commission to meet the needs of persons who were not Hebraists. While they should not be regarded as a full and comprehensive commentary on the textual and philological decisions of the panel, a number of correspondents have found them helpful.

# Introduction

## The Psalms

Christians have used the Psalms in their praises of God, in their prayers and in their meditations since the earliest days of the Church. The Jews have used the Psalms for a much longer time, for they were composed for use in ancient Israel. The majority of the Psalms are hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God for what he is and for what he has done (e.g. Ps. 8, 104, 135), or prayers for help and laments because of the sufferings of an individual (e.g. Ps. 6, 22) or his anxieties (e.g. Ps. 77), or because of some national disaster such as defeat in battle (e.g. Ps. 44) or the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (e.g. Ps. 74, 79). There are also meditations on God's providence (e.g. Ps. 49, 73, 78) or on his commandments (e.g. Ps. 1, 119). Other Psalms were composed for particular occasions in the nation's life: for the accession of a new king (Ps. 2), for a royal wedding (Ps. 45), or for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the temple (e.g. Ps. 84, 122). The temple was the place where most Psalms were originally intended to be sung, but they also came to be used by Jewish congregations in their synagogues and by individuals in their private prayers.

The period in which the Psalms were composed in ancient Israel goes back as early as the time of King David (c. 1000 BC), though modern scholars have questioned the tradition that he was the author of a large number of the poems in our Psalter. Some Psalms were certainly written much later: Ps. 137, for instance, speaks of the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to Babylon in the sixth century BC. Most of the Psalms, however cannot be dated precisely and might have been written at almost any time within a period of several centuries. Nor do we know when the last poem in the Psalter was written, though

it was probably not later than about 200 BC and may well have been much earlier. The Psalms thus reflect something like three quarters of a millennium in the life and worship of ancient Israel.

Jesus was born a Jew, and he was brought up to know the Psalms intimately and to ponder them. He quoted them in his teaching, and words from the Psalter were on his lips as he hung on the cross. The Church learned from him, and from God's ancient people the Jews, to value the Psalms, and Christians have used them ever since.

When Christians read the Psalms, they meditate and share the thoughts and varied emotions of the people of God in the Old Testament, the people to whom God made himself known, and they share in Israel's experience of God. The God of the Psalms is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ has, however, made a difference, and Christians cannot always think of God in exactly the same way as those who lived before the birth, and death, and resurrection of Jesus. Christians cannot make their own everything in the Psalter, at least not in its original sense. We cannot, for example, identify ourselves with the author of Ps. 137 when he blesses those who will dash Babylonian children against the rocks, however well we may understand the Psalmist's reaction to the murder by Babylonian soldiers of Jewish children. There are parts of the Psalter that Christians must read with detachment. Many Christians feel that they must go further and refrain from the use of such passages, at least in public worship. Nevertheless, although there are verses in the Psalter whose sentiments Christians must not share, there remains much more which they can wholeheartedly make their own.

Throughout the centuries, Christians of different persuasions have found the Psalms a means of prayer and worship that fulfilled their needs. In the future, as in the past, Christians will use the Psalms both in the public worship of the Church and in their private devotions, in meditation, in prayer, and, above all, in praise.