

HYMNS ON THE PSALMS

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Hymns on the Psalms by Anonymous

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THE PSALMS**

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BY THE AUTHOR OF

"THE BOOK OF PSALMS
OF DAVID THE KING AND PROPHET;"

"DAVID'S VISION;"

&c., &c.



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PREFACE.

WHEN we take up any collection of "Psalms and Hymns," we cannot but be struck with the difference between the two. This difference does not arise solely from the former being founded on the Old Testament, and the latter on the New, but it is exhibited in a comparative coldness about the one, and a lively spirituality about the other. In consequence of this we find the Hymn is the general favourite, and therefore generally selected. One result of this has been that most of our modern collections are composed entirely of Hymns. Now why is this? How is it that Psalmic poetry is considered less devotional, or less adapted to spiritual song? The reason is that Hymn-writers, while giving full exercise to their spiritual and devotional feelings when writing Hymns, have but too generally, when composing Psalms, confined themselves to the mere words of David, without feeling them, instead of endeavouring to catch the spirit of his Psalms: they have too generally

merely thrown the Psalm into verse ; and such paraphrases, however well they may have been executed, always appear to disadvantage by the side of the old familiar words of the Psalm itself.* While the Psalms of David will ever be cherished as the highest devotional expression of every child of God, the paraphrases and poetical versions of the Psalms are regarded as most uninteresting, from their being totally void of that fire and spirit which are characteristic of true poetry, but more particularly so of the inspired poetry of the Hebrews. In the original Psalm the poet was inspired by God, and every expression made use of shows the reality of the Psalmist's devotion, the ardour of his love to God, and the deep remorse of his own sin. But in the poetical version of these Psalms, instead of the holy Prophet's inspiration, and the Psalmist's genius, we see only the servile and laborious working of the often contemptible versifier. Thus the force and sacred character of the original are quite buried in the dull monotony of the lifeless copy. We take up the Book of Psalms as a book written by "the sweet Psalmist of Israel," a man after God's own heart, and inspired by the Holy Ghost : and in reading what he has written we endeavour to realize his life, and the circumstances under which he wrote his psalms, and to adopt what he wrote for our own instruction and godliness :

* Harless truly observes, "The best attempts of this kind only satisfy one in proportion as we are able first of all to banish the remembrance of the original from our mind."

but in turning these Psalms into metre, they are no longer the inspired words of God, "written for our admonition unto whom the ends of the world are come;" but by the necessity of verse much is left out, and much is added, so that they become our compositions, and these compositions not only lose by being deprived of the touch of inspiration, but also by the absence of much of their original teaching, and by having adopted much that is foreign and perhaps erroneous.

This treatment of the Psalms the author considers to be a mistake, and he has therefore made it his object to turn the Psalm into a Hymn; a proceeding by which he believes one is more able to write poetry instead of verse; as it not only emancipates the writer from the necessity of a too servile rendering of the original, by enabling him to give scope to those points to which he considers it desirable to give greater relevance; but it permits him by so doing to cast his piece into a more perfect form. Let us take for example the first Psalm, and "turn it into metre:"

How blest are all God's servants here,
Who walk in His just way;
Who keep their feet in holy fear,
Lest they with sinners stray.

How blest who God's most holy word
Receive with great delight,
Who make their lives with it accord,
And serve Him day and night;

Who sin and sinners always shun,
 Who scornful men detest ;
 In paths of righteousness who dwell,
 And follow God's behest ;

Who reverence to His precepts give,
 Who love His righteous ways ;
 Who strive in holiness to live,
 And learn to sing His praise.

The righteous man shall prosper here,
 God watcheth o'er his ways ;
 God shall preserve him in His fear,
 And guard him all his days.

And then compare this Psalm with its altered appearance as exhibited in the first Hymn of the following collection, where being a Hymn and not a Psalm, it is capable of being cast in a new form.

The oriental style of the original, the length of the composition, its historical character, and the exact delineation of the Psalmist's thoughts, often cause the Psalm to wander discursively from one subject to another, and then back again ; but in the *Hymn* this procedure would be inadmissible. The restricted length of the Hymn, and its methodical arrangement, require the subject of each verse to proceed in one uniform succession, beginning perhaps with an expression of repentance or despair, followed by earnest prayer, and terminating with triumphant trust. The structure of a Hymn therefore should be harmonious, and its subject continuous. Expressions of affliction should be followed by ascriptions

of praise ; despair should be succeeded by hope, sorrow by joy and exultation, the cares and anxieties of earth should give place to the bliss and ecstasies of heaven. Blessing from God should lead to gratitude to God : doubts of God should be changed to trust and confidence in God ; love to greater love ; joy to greater joy ; faith to greater faith : all feelings should be intensified ; so that at the conclusion of the Hymn the soul should be left in a state of ecstasy and of repose in God.

Even with the Psalms as they stand, we find evidence of this artificial construction. Most of the Psalms conclude with an antiphon, giving emphasis to the subject-matter of the Psalm, or to some particular portion of it : and we find sometimes the natural order of the discourse changed, so as to make the structure more harmonious. Thus, the sixty-eighth Psalm should have begun at the seventh verse—

“ O God, when Thou wentest forth before the people.”

Instead of which it begins more emphatically by quoting the words which Moses uttered (Numbers x. 25), each time that the ark went forward :—

“ Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered ;
Let them also that hate Him flee before Him.”

In the thirtieth Psalm the natural order would have been to begin with the sixth verse :—

“ In my prosperity I said—I shall never be removed ;
Thou, Lord, of Thy goodness hast made my hill so strong.”