

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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The Book of Psalms by T. K. Cheyne

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T. K. CHEYNE

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BOOK OF PSALMS

TRANSLATED BY THE
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INTRODUCTION.

I.

THE best Introduction to the Psalter is the practice of free and unconstrained private devotion. A bad translation of an uncorrected text will be more illuminative to a devout mind than the choicest and most scholarly rendering to an unsympathetic reader. The Psalter stands alone as a devotional classic of the first rank in virtue of its originality, and only he who is to some extent original in his religious life, and who waits upon the Giver of all good things for impulses and inspirations, can appreciate the freedom and vigour of the expressions and ideas of the Psalms. It is not just to these precious lyrics, however, to read them exclusively in a version several centuries old. Exquisite as the Prayer-book version may be, and possibly the Bible version too to ears unfamiliar with the older music, either rendering does but convey that part of the meaning and the charm which was accessible to the men of the sixteenth century. The rhythmic effect of the old versions of the Bible (on which Mr. Matthew Arnold, in *Isaiah of Jerusalem*, lays so much stress) may be admirable of its kind, but

it is not the lightning-like effect of the Hebrew ; the collocations of words and syllables may be suggestive, but they are often miles removed from the sense of the original ; and loose as may be the connection of thought in an Eastern lyric, it is not so loose as the connection in our Prayer-book and Bible versions. It is therefore not unjustifiable to offer a new translation of the Psalms, which, though its diction has not been uncared for, does not pretend to give a faithful echo of the rhythms of the past.

There is no irreverence in this ; Hebrew scholars can be catholic in their literary tastes, and if they lay it down as a canon of translation, that sense should generally take precedence of sound, it is not because they are deaf to the charm of rhythmic melody. Nor ought they, at this hour of the day, to be accused of temerity in deviating from the received Hebrew text. The younger school of Hebrew scholars looks upon the textual and exegetical tradition much as the Sanskrit school represented by Mr. Max Müller looks upon the exegetical tradition of Sayana, and earnestly as it deprecates the excesses of some isolated critics, will not pretend to translate that which cannot be translated, simply because the frequent irregularities of Hebrew usage make some current rendering, apart from exegesis, not absolutely inadmissible. The present translator is very conscious of his fallibility ; but he prefers to offer in such cases a plausible and worthy rendering, based upon some natural emendation, to airing his grammatical acumen at the expense of propriety and connection. Rather than do this, indeed, he has sometimes left a blank in his version to indicate that the text is perhaps corrupt, and certainly to the translator unintelligible.

It need hardly be said that he has profited by good suggestions wherever he has found them ; Dr. Kay's translation may be mentioned in particular as a most helpful and scholarly version of the received text. Keble's too little known metrical version has now and again supplied a felicitous phrase ; it is the production of a poetical student, though as a work of art it cannot compare with the metrical German translation, or rather reproduction, of the Psalms by one of the most studious of poets, Julius Hammer. Another metrical version, also in German, arrived too late to be of use. Its author, Dr. Gustav Bickell, had, however, already published a metrical edition in Hebrew of the poetical parts of the Old Testament, which, though too bold to be adopted as a basis in its entirety, proved an invaluable supplement to the already existing text-critical apparatus. The author of the famous article, "Israel," in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Julius Wellhausen), has well remarked that, whatever may be said of Dr. Bickell's supposed metrical discoveries, his critical labours have often led him to self-evident corrections of the Hebrew text.

The object of the present edition is to enable lovers of literature to read the Psalter intelligently and with pleasure. The Dictionary of the Bible and the various commentaries on the Psalms will supply the *student* with learned material in abundance. But the ambition of the publishers and the translator is to make the Psalms enjoyable, and learned controversies are not aesthetically enjoyable. A few points, however, require to be mentioned here in order to promote an intelligent pleasure in these lyrics. The first, which is one of the fruits of the Semitic renaissance due to Assyriology and Egyptology, is that the Psalms are

not so entirely exceptional as many of us have believed. Even in Israel, indeed, the tone of thought and feeling characteristic of the Psalms was much more widely spread than a one-sided study of the Old Testament might lead us to suppose. The proper names preserved in the Hebrew records prove this ; and when we discover that the Hebrew proper names may be paralleled by those of Assyria, we are prepared to find it not too bold an assertion, that it was only the want of the higher spiritual prophecy as a teaching and purifying agent, and of a longer course of development, which prevented the sacred poetry of Babylonia and Assyria from rivalling that of the successors of David. Let me quote one or two passages to prove that, however short their flights, the Babylonian poets were no strangers to the regions of spiritual devotion.

- 1 The anger of my lord's heart,
 may it be appeased !
- 2 O god, may the ignorant come unto wisdom !
 O goddess, may the ignorant come unto wisdom !
- 3 The god who knows what is unknown,
 may he be appeased !
- 4 The goddess who knows what is unknown,
 may she be appeased !

- 5 I am cast down,
 and none reaches forth his hand to me.
- 6 I weep in silence,
 and no man takes my hand.
- 7 I utter my prayer,
 and none hears me.
- 8 I am enfeebled, overwhelmed,
 and no man delivers me.

- 9 O my god, my sins are seven times seven,
 absolve my sins.

- 10 O my goddess, my sins are seven times seven,
absolve my sins !
- 11 God, who knowest what is unknown,
my sins are seven times seven, absolve my sins !
- 12 Goddess, who knowest what is unknown,
my sins are seven times seven, absolve my sins !
- 13 Absolve my faults !
guide thou him who submits himself to thee !
- 14 May thy heart, as the heart of a mother who has brought
forth, be appeased !
- 15 As the heart of a mother who has brought forth, and of a
father who has begotten,
may it be appeased !¹

Making every allowance for the obscurity of the language, and the consequent uncertainty of some phrases in the translation, this is certainly a remarkable production for "a date anterior to the 17th century B.C."² Now take another, which, like the foregoing, is preserved in an Accadian or proto-Babylonian and in an Assyrian form. The moon-god, Sin, is addressed.³

- 1 In the heaven who is exalted ?
Thou. Thy commandment is exalted.
- 2 Upon the earth who is exalted ?
Thou. Thy commandment is exalted.
- 3 Thy will, even thine, is published in the heaven,
and the archangels of heaven bow down their faces.
- 4 Thy will, even thine, is published on the earth,
and the archangels of earth kiss the ground.
- 5 Thy will, even thine, from above, like the space of heaven in
its openness,
makes the earth to bring forth.

¹ Lenormant, "The Penitential Psalms of the Chaldeans,"
The Academy, July 20, 1878.

² Sayce, *Records of the Past*, vol. vii. p. 151.

³ Lenormant, *Études accadiennes*, t. ii. p. 147.