

**SCENES FROM  
SCRIPTURE,  
WITH OTHER POEMS**

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Scenes from scripture, with other poems by George Croly

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BY

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## P R E F A C E.

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THE History of English Versions from the Hebrew poets is yet to be written. But Warton, in his volumes on English poetry, has referred to the subject, at sufficient length to satisfy general curiosity, and with sufficient elegance to gratify public taste.

In the primitive worship of Christianity, the singing of "Psalms, and Hymns, and Spiritual Songs," occupied an important place. But in the worship of the Romish Church, that place was gradually filled by the chaunting of the priest; while, in the progress of musical science, the Anthem superseded the simplicity of the Hymn.

In the sixteenth century, the Reformers restored the singing of the congregation to its original rank; and the Psalmody of Luther and his successors formed a characteristic feature of the popular devotion. Whether

to counteract this new influence, or to re-establish a reputation for piety, Clement Marot, a name equally known in his day for poetry and profligacy, in 1539, published a French version of thirty of the Psalms, and the success of this work was as singular as its origin. Dedicated to Francis I., with the *imprimatur* of the Sorbonne, it was welcomed by the Monarch almost with enthusiasm; novelty, nationality, and, perhaps, rivalry of the Reformers, made it universally popular. Francis and his courtiers selected each a Psalm, for peculiar favouritism; and the most immoral Court in Europe resounded with religious song.

This was the age of verbal chivalry; and France gave the amplest testimony of its spirit, by inscribing on the tomb of Marot: "Ci gist des Français le Virgile et l'Homère."

The celebrated Calvin, with whom Marot was intimate, introduced this version into the Church of Geneva, and employed Beza to complete the whole number of the Psalms. The faults attributed to Beza's performance are, a general tendency to unnecessary paraphrase, occasional misconceptions of the original, and the use of expressions too familiar for the dignity of Scripture.

With the Reformation congregational singing began in England. For the first time in a thousand years the



people were joined with the minister in an important, beautiful, and affecting portion of Christian worship. Congregational singing now became a public right, and the version of the Psalms a public demand. Single Psalms were rapidly contributed; of those the ablest were by the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt. But a general version was required, and this was undertaken—unfortunately more to the honour of their diligence, than of their capacity—by Sternhold and Hopkins.

Sternhold was a man of condition, educated at Oxford, and Groom of the Robes to Henry VIII., who, as a mark of his approval, left him a legacy. He held the same considerable office under Edward VI. Hopkins seems to have been little more than his editor. Sternhold died, when he had versified about a third of the Psalms, but he had several assistants, by whom the work appears to have been completed. The first edition was published in 1562. The work has passed into a proverb, for presumption of attempt and inadequacy of means.

Warton, himself a scholar and a poet, says: "Our versifiers of the Psalms have been but little qualified, either by genius or accomplishments, for poetical composition. It is for this reason that they have produced

a translation entirely destitute of elegance, spirit, and propriety."

He adds: "I presume I am communicating no very new criticism, when I observe, that in every part of this translation we are disgusted with a languor of versification, and a want of common prosody, characterizing the whole as lowered by coldness of conception, weakened by frigid interpolations, and disfigured by a poverty of phraseology."

Bishop Horsely boldly takes the opposite side. "The metrical version of the old singing Psalms by Sternhold and Hopkins is not, what I believe it is generally supposed to be, nothing better than an awkward versification of a former English translation. It was an original translation from the Hebrew text, earlier, by many years, than the prose translation in the Bible; and it is the best and most exact we have, to put into the hands of the common people. The authors of this version considered the verse merely as a contrivance to assist the memory."

However, he thus gives up its poetry, the matter in question. He then falls on the present version by Tate and Brady:

"It was a change much for the worse, when the pedantry of pretenders to taste thrust out this excel-

lent (!) translation from many of our churches, to make room for that which goes by the name of the New Version, which in many places where the old version is just, accurate, and dignified by its simplicity, is careless and inadequate, and, by the poverty and littleness of its style, contemptible."

But the public taste had long decided against the ancient version, whose whole force consists in a rugged adherence to the original. Warton's exaggerated scorn of *all* versions of the Sacred Writings, may be partially attributed to the peculiar provocations of a time, in which Scripture was treated with irreverent familiarity, in which Hymns conveyed the language of almost earthly passion, and the highest doctrines were rhymed into the transports of religious reverie. Of those, he indignantly speaks "as exhibiting a *species* of poetry, if it may be so called, which even impoverishes prose, or rather by mixing the style of prose with verse, and of verse with prose, destroys the character and effect of both."

On the whole; when it is remembered, that the ancient version was made on the verge of the Elizabethan age, when the English tongue was most poetic, when Spenser was so soon to display the redundant luxuriance of the language, and Shakespeare to show its