

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for the *Journal of Theological Studies* (old series) can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jts-os_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[1st page of article]

REVISION OF THE PRAYER BOOK PSALTER.

BEING THE REPORT OF A COMMITTEE APPOINTED BY THE
ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY. S.P.C.K. 1916.

THE Prayer Book Version of the Psalter has escaped hitherto all authoritative revision, and it ought to stand to-day as it stood in the Great Bible of 1539 or at least in the edition of 1540. But that insistent and irrepressible reviser the Printer has been constantly at work. His hand has been on the spelling and punctuation, and even on the colon which adapts the text for singing. The Psalms of the Prayer Book have a deceptive appearance of modernity, and the current text can make no claim to minute accuracy. Thus in a good modern edition we read :

'I am weary of my groaning; every night wash I my bed:
and water my couch with my tears.
My beauty is gone for very trouble:
and worn away because of all mine enemies.

All mine enemies shall be confounded, and sore vexed:
they shall be turned back, and put to shame suddenly.'

(Ps. vi 6, 7, 10.)

But the verses untouched by the Printer wear quite another aspect :

'I am weery of my gronyng:
euery nyght wash I my bedde, and water my couche with my
teares.

My bewtie is gone for very trouble,
& worne away because of all myne enemyes.

All myne enemyes shalbe confounded and soore vexed:
they shalbe turned backe and put to shame, sodenly.'

An authoritative revision is needed not only to correct some bad mistakes of translation, but also to control the unlicensed corrections of the Printer. Of these some were good and some bad. It was necessary to test them, and to reject the unworthy. But it was a yet more pressing duty to remove the mistranslations of important words and phrases which were too numerous for the credit of the Church which put them into the mouths of worshippers. The version was in the main the work of Coverdale, a man of good sense with a marked power of writing the wholesome 'market English' of his time, but with small claim to Hebrew scholarship.

The Committee appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to revise the Psalter might be described as an expansion of Coverdale himself. It represented good sense and scholarship, but not much Hebrew. The two Hebrew scholars who were selected were swamped by six non-Hebraists; indeed, it was originally intended that the six should be eight. The second clause of the Report speaks of the Prayer Book Psalter as a 'great English classic', and the Committee worked no doubt with this phrase borne constantly in mind.

When we consider the depressing circumstances under which revision of any matter whatsoever is carried out in this country, we are bound to offer our sincerest thanks to a Committee which undertook and executed the thankless task of revising the text of the English Psalter. To put the case bluntly, Coverdale's English was very good, while his Hebrew was very bad: how then was his translation to be mended without injury to his periods?

The conservative character of the revision is manifest at once in the retention of the many additional words and clauses which are not found in the Hebrew text. It is true that the Revisers omit from Psalm xiv three verses (5-7), the longest interpolation found in the LXX and Vulgate text, but this is perhaps the only exception.¹ On the other hand they retain cxxxvi 27 (whole verse); xiii 6^b (half-verse); i 5; ii 11, 12; iii 2; iv 8; xiv 2, 9; xxii 1; lxxiii 28. The Revisers have not cut down the 'corn and wine *and oil*' (iv 8) of 1539 to match the plain 'corn and wine' of the Hebrew text, and Psalm xxii still begins (as in the LXX) with the words, 'My God, my God, *look upon me.*' Fullness and roundness of phrasing still mark the P. B. Version.

Some happy changes of punctuation have been introduced by the Committee, changes, that is to say, on the text of modern editions. The revised stopping is sometimes in fact not new, but a return to that of 1539. A good instance of this is found in lxii 9 (see also xviii 15):

'As for the children of men, they are but vanity, the children
of men are deceitful:
upon the weights they are altogether lighter than vanity itself.'

Further, in seven instances the Revisers recommend that a verse be subdivided. In each case it must be said that the suggestion is good, for the verse (as it stands) is certainly too long to be smoothly chanted. Thus xviii 1 is most difficult to sing undivided, and accordingly the Committee proposes the following arrangement:

1. I will love thee, O Lord, my strength:
the Lord is my stony rock, and my defence;

¹ Add xlv 12 (an important passage).

2. My saviour, my God, and my might, in whom I will trust :
my buckler, the horn also of my salvation, and my refuge.

In detail this fresh division is open to criticism. The Psalters of 1535 and 1539 while taking the passage as one verse, placed the colon dividing the two half-verses after the words 'My saviour'. This agrees with accentuation of the Masoretic text, which in turn is based on knowledge of Hebrew association of ideas. The obvious ζυγά are (1) My defence and my saviour (deliverer), and (2) My God and my might (rock: *ḥūri* Heb.). It would therefore be more faithful to the original to transfer the words 'My saviour' to *v.* 1, and to begin *v.* 2 with 'My God'. Such an address as 'My God' should surely have nothing before it.

The conservative character of the revision is specially marked in the smallness of the number of 'changes in words' which are proposed. Readers of the late Dr Driver's *Parallel Psalter* would probably expect them to be three or four times as numerous as they are. But the Committee held its hand. Even where changes are made they are in many cases rather improvements in the English than corrections of the translation. Archaisms have been treated tenderly (*shawmes* is retained in xcvi 7; and *require*—alas!—in xxvii 4), but in several urgent cases they have been removed to the great advantage of the English reader. *Leasing* (iv 2) has gone, and *naughty*¹ (lxxxvi 14) with it. *Persecute* is in some cases changed into *pursue* (xxxv 6; lxxxiii 15). *Prevent* has disappeared from xviii 18 [19], which now reads, 'They *came upon* me in the day of my trouble', a useful correction. Some profitable changes in proper names have been made: *Rahab* has become *Egypt* (lxxxvii 3); *Cades* is now spelt *Kadesh* (xxix 7), and *Phinees* is written *Phinehas* (cvi 30) as in A. V. One could wish that the hissing form *Manasses* had similarly been changed to *Manasseh* (lxxx 2). Further, some of the grotesque turns of the Great Bible are amended, such as, 'Vex him as a thing *that is raw*' (lviii 8 [9]); 'he smote his enemies *in the hinder parts*' (lxxviii 67); 'thou that leadest Joseph *like a sheep*' (lxxx 1). From xxix 1 the Revisers have turned out the 'young rams' which skipped into the text through an error of the LXX: there is no allusion to animal sacrifice in the original. On the other hand it is much to be regretted that lxviii 4 is untouched:

'O sing unto God, and sing praises unto his name:
magnify him that rideth upon the heavens,
[as it were upon an horse;]
praise him in his name JAH, and rejoice before him.'

¹ The Revisers resisted the temptation to re-introduce the *naughtipackes* of the Bishops' Bible.

Münster's clumsy note on the text probably misrepresents the original (cp. v. 17), and certainly spoils the balance of the clauses for singing.

The revision of vv. 13, 14 is tantalizing in its result; having begun it might well have proceeded further. The Committee plainly accepted the view that the passage contains a rebuke of those Israelite forces which did not come 'to the help of the LORD against the mighty' on some great occasion; cp. Judges v 16. Accordingly the revised text begins boldly:

'Will ye abide among the sheepfolds . . . ?'

But it proceeds rather feebly with the old text unrevised:

'as the wings of a dove.'

Why 'as'? Moreover, the old lack of connexion between v. 13 and v. 14 is retained. No continuity is suggested by the proposed new rendering:

'When the Almighty scattered kings for their sake:
then fell they as thick as snow in Salmon.'

Surely it would have been an improvement to have given some such rendering as the following, which acknowledges a close connexion between the two verses:

'Will ye abide among the sheepfolds, (:)
O wings of the dove that is covered with silver,
and her feathers with the sheen of gold,
when the Almighty scattereth kings for her, (:)
when it snoweth in Salmon?'

The reproach conveyed in these words may be briefly explained. The favoured, beautiful dove is Israel. Its 'wings' (as in Isa. xviii 1) are the forces which might come swiftly to help their struggling countrymen, but yet seem inclined to hang back in the day of battle. What if JEHOVAH himself is scattering the enemy? The laggards remember rather that it is a day of snow.¹

Under the heading, 'Changes in words', many very useful improvements are proposed, some apparently insignificant, and yet all perhaps worth making. Some changes in tenses are decidedly helpful; e.g. xvi 10 ('my heart *is* glad'); xxxiii 13 (cp. v. 14); xli 8; l 16 ('*saiith* God'); cxvi 4 ('I *found* trouble'). The small change of singular to plural is good in xlvi 10 ('The daughters, i.e. cities, of Judah'), and very good in xxxi 17 ('My times, i.e. both of prosperity and of adversity, are in thy hand'). Again, the use of the word

¹ 'Tryphon made ready all his horse . . . and he came not *by reason of the snow*' (1 Macc. xiii 22).

'saying' to introduce words which are not the Psalmist's own is a welcome improvement; see ii 2 (so A. V.); xli 7 (cp. A. V.). It is, however, a serious fault that the Revisers have not marked in the same way the beginning of the Enemy's curses in cix 5-18. A clear and consistent account of the structure of the Psalm can be given, *if* (and only *if*) *vv.* 5-18 (6-19, Heb.) be taken as a quotation by the Psalmist of curses aimed against himself. Thus in *vv.* 1-4 (1-5, Heb.) the Psalmist speaks consistently of his *enemies* in the plural (*eight* plurals!), and so again in *vv.* 19-30 (20-31, Heb.), where *eleven* plurals are found. It is utterly different in the imprecatory passage, *vv.* 5-18 (6-19, Heb.); here it is a single person against whom the curses are aimed, and the singular number is consistently used. The only exceptions are apparent, not real. Thus in *v.* 12 (13, Heb.), 'Let their name¹ be blotted out' (A. V., R. V.) the reference of the pronoun is to 'his (the enemy's) posterity', a plural conception.

Now if the single person cursed in *vv.* 5-18 be the Psalmist himself, the connexion throughout the Psalm is clear, as the following analysis shews:—

Vv. 1-4. The Psalmist complains that '*the mouth* of the deceitful *is opened*' upon him and that he is compassed about with *words of hatred*.

Vv. 5-18. The Psalmist recites these *words of hatred* in his prayer, just as Hezekiah spread out the letter of Sennacherib and recited its *reproaches* before the LORD (2 Kings xix 14-16).

V. 19. The Psalmist uneasy at even reciting 'words that may do hurt' seeks to turn their edge away from himself by the formula, 'Let it thus happen [rather] to mine enemies from the Lord, and to those that *speak evil against my soul*.'

Vv. 20-30. The Psalmist makes his own petition, and prays for deliverance from his enemies. A careful reading of these verses (as also of *vv.* 1-4) shews that the Psalmist is on the defensive. He represents the beaten side which the victorious foe is pursuing and would fain annihilate with a mighty curse. (The case of Ps. lxxix is quite different; there the denunciations are the Psalmist's own.)

In introducing changes of wording the Revisers have made good use of earlier versions. Their work shews the influence of the Genevan translation of 1560 and of the Bishops' Bible of 1568, as well as that of the A. V. and R. V. But the Committee has found some happy renderings (or paraphrases) of its own:

'The strange children shall *abuse themselves before me*' (dissemble with me: xviii 45 [46]).

'As the *flower of the field*' (as the fat of lambs: xxxvii 20).

¹ 'his name' (P.B.) = τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, LXX.

A spirited effort to get sense from a difficult phrase !

'Why *mock* ye so, ye high hills' (Why hoppe ye so ye hye hylles : lxxviii 16, Great Bible).

'In the appointed time, saith God :

I shall judge according unto right' (lxxv 3).

'Great is the peace that they have who love thy law :

and they *shall have no hurt*' (are not offended at it : cxix 165).

Perhaps every reader of the Report of the Committee will look in vain for some particular emendation which appears to him specially desirable. The present reviewer would have liked to find a clearer rendering of cxix 85 :

'The proud have digged pits for me :
which are not after thy law.'

Is it the 'pits' or the 'proud' who do not conform to the Divine law ? Perhaps a better rendering (or paraphrase), specially for the Prayer Book Psalter, would be :

'Pits were digged for me by the proud :
who walk not after thy law.'

Further, it may be doubted whether it was wise to keep the archaism of xcvi 7 :

'With trumpets also and *shawms* :
O shew yourselves joyful before the Lord the King.'

That a *shawm*, 'a scrannel pipe of wretched straw', could really bear a part in the tremendous harmony for which the Psalmist calls is quite unlikely. The Hebrew *shōphār*, 'cornet', would produce ten times the volume of sound, we may well believe.

From one alteration at least we may rejoice that the Committee held its hand. A paragraph on p. 10 tells us that the Revisers were tempted to desert the Hebrew text of ii 12 ('Kiss the son'—*נשקו בן*) in favour of the *δράξαθε παιδῆας* of the LXX (*apprehendite disciplinam*, Vulgate). Such a step would have been a very hardy venture. In the first place the summons of the Masoretic text, *Kiss*, i. e. 'make the sign of submission', answers exactly to the context: *יהוה* has set his king upon Mount Sion, though the nations rage against him. Secondly, the rendering of LXX (*δράξαθε*) does *not* suggest a consonantal reading different from that of M. T. The derivative meaning of *נשק* (in Piel) is 'to kiss', but a more fundamental signification found in the Kal voice is 'grasp, take hold of' or perhaps 'press'; cp. i Chron. xii 2 ; Ps. lxxviii 9 ; Job xxxi 27. The word translated *son* (*בן*) does indeed raise difficulty, but some such phrase as 'Kiss the son' is demanded by the context. We need as the object of the verb a substantive which answers to 'his anointed' (v. 2), 'my king' (v. 6), and 'my son' (v. 7)

JEHOVAH's protégé (if the term may be used) is mentioned in each of the first three strophes of the Psalm, and the fourth strophe is left with a strange gap, if the word בֵּן 'son' is removed without some word roughly synonymous being put in its place. 'Kiss my chosen one' (בְּחִירִי, Isa. xlii 1) would (e. g.) give the required sense. In the meantime the Revisers have given, 'Honour the son', a rendering which is sufficiently true to the context to inspire the student with confidence that the general sense of the passage is preserved.

The final recommendation of the report is that the question of the omission of certain passages in the Psalter of the Book of Common Prayer should be taken into consideration by the proper authorities. The list of such passages which they give is as follows :

Ps. v 9-11; lv 16, 24, 25; lviii, the whole Psalm; lxxviii 21-23; lxix 23-29; cxix 5-19; cxxxvii 7-9; cxxxix 19-22; cxl 9, 10; cxliii 12, adding the final words 'For I am thy servant' to v. 11.

We rise from the perusal of the work of the Committee with a deep sense of the faithfulness, care, and patience of the members. They have not scrupled to take pains over small details in the hope that the general result would repay their toil: no useful correction is too small for them. Not only have they made changes in spelling and punctuation such as have been noticed above, but they have also corrected long-standing misprints; *sight* for *light* in xxxviii 10; and *cleaveth* for *cleaved* in lxxviii 9. They have not hurried over their task; their first meeting took place on Oct. 14, 1913, and since then they have held nineteen meetings of two days each. Much work of less formal kind was done between the meetings by single members and by sub-committees. The result of their deliberations did not reach the general public until the last days of August, 1916. The Revisers have made their appeal specially to those numerous English Churchmen who while deeply conservative in mind yet have a desire to sing their praises with understanding. It is earnestly to be hoped that the labour of the Revisers will not be allowed to be lost. In this time of war no hasty acceptance can be given to their work, but it now lies before us in the handy form of a small well-printed book which exhibits the complete text of the Psalter as revised, followed by the Report itself.¹ If serious criticisms are published on the recommendations of the Report, the Archbishop will (we may suppose) ask the Committee to consider them, but in any case it is to be hoped that the main results of the faithful care of the Revisers will be incorporated at no distant day in the Psalter of the Church of England.

W. EMERY BARNES.

¹ The Prayer Book Psalter revised. Report and Text. S.P.C.K. London 1916. Cloth boards, 3s. net.