

“Jeffrey Cohen’s work is a worthy, lively and instructive version of these ancient and ineffable poems. The easily accessible register of language, conveyed in probably the only poetic form known to those whom the author seeks to reach, is greatly effective. Overall, he succeeds in reproducing the flow and integrity of the Hebrew original and, in the case of obscure and difficult verses in the Hebrew (and there are many), his judgment is remarkably consistent with up-to-date research. It is clear that he has made extensive use of many versions, ancient and modern. While his Psalms naturally maintain a proper and delicate Jewish flavour, that in no way precludes their use by Christians.”

Rev Dr Andrew Macintosh (from the Foreword)

“You really do a most impressive job on these difficult texts, combining sound renderings with literary polish and exegetical allusion.”

Professor Stefan Reif, Former Professor of Hebrew and Director of The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Unit, Cambridge University

“Every new translation of a classic text affords us a fresh perspective on the power and beauty of the original. In this striking and wonderfully accessible translation of the Book of Psalms, Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen gives us renewed insight into the greatest of all books of religious poetry, the unsurpassed music of the soul as it sings its songs to God.”

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain

“I can see why they impress, and they would make an attractive volume.”

Professor Nathan MacDonald, University Lecturer in Hebrew Bible, University of Cambridge

“So much in the poems is arresting and impressive, and the overall sense is of a faithful, and yet innovative, rendering. Your translations frequently give a new twist to familiar texts, and quite a few are downright brilliant! One is reminded that the psalms are for adaptation and contemporising, and that the evidence for this begins in the Psalter itself. A superb anthology of engaging and imaginative re-phrasings of the Psalter seems in prospect. One greatly looks forward!”

Robert P. Gordon Emeritus Regius Professor of Hebrew, St Catharine’s College, University of Cambridge.

“One of my retirement projects is an attempt to get to know the Psalms. As I work my way through them I look at various translations as well as the original Hebrew text. Your version in many passages is blisteringly original and immensely topical. I look forward keenly to reading the Jeffrey Cohen Psalter when it appears.”

Philip Skelker, Former Headmaster, Immanuel College, Bushey, and English Master, Eton College.

“Thank you so much for the privilege of pre-viewing your magnum opus. As a ‘man in the pew’, I mumble the psalms, only occasionally taking on board their import. However, when I read through your version I realised that there is no comparison with any previous edition. You have created a new form which touches the emotions directly. I know that one needs to study to fully appreciate the majesty of the psalms, but, magically, you seem to have brought the text to life in a way that goes straight to the heart. Please excuse this gushing praise but I have been very moved!”

Dr Maurice Faigenblum, Stanmore, Middlesex, UK.

The Book of Psalms

The Book of Psalms

Poetry in Poetry

Jeffrey M. Cohen

Foreword by A. A. Macintosh

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Poetry in Poetry

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An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-5076-5

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-5077-2

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-5078-9

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Foreword

THE PSALMS OF ANCIENT Israel, of Judaism and of Christianity, constitute one of the most translated texts in history. Written originally in Hebrew in the first millennium BCE, they were known to early Christians only in the Greek translation until, in 400 CE, it dawned on Jerome that the Hebrew text was the original, prompting him to set about translating anew the Hebrew text into Latin. In the Jewish tradition there were Aramaic translations known *as Targums*, and it is supposed that they grew out of oral renderings offered by synagogue interpreters following the formal reading of each verse in Hebrew. The *Targums* are, perhaps naturally, free and replete with explanatory material.

Motivation and intention lie behind all translations. The Jewish Scholar Aquila (117-138 CE) was primarily concerned to force his Greek translation to reveal as much of the original Hebrew as possible, creating thereby perhaps the most literal translation known to us. By contrast, Jerome's intention was rather to convey the sense of the original, and this in the elegant Latin of his day. He was also keen to improve the accuracy of the translation as compared with that of the previous Latin translations from the Greek, defined by their nature as textual 'grandsons.'

Where English translations are concerned, that of Miles Coverdale, done in 1538, has been widely loved for some 400 years. His version, however, made from the old (pre-Jerome) Latin version, which in turn was a rendering of the Greek, has the characteristics of the Curate's Egg. In places the version offers the beauty of Shakespearian English; elsewhere, being a textual 'great-grandson' of the Hebrew, it lapses into sheer, if beautiful, nonsense. Impressive for its scholarly accuracy and its incorporation of up-to-date research into the ancient Hebrew language, is *The Cambridge*

Liturgical Psalter, commission by the Church of England in the 1970s. It is a completely new version of the original Hebrew in modern English.

Against this vast and complicated background, Dr Jeffrey Cohen has crafted his own English translation of the Hebrew. He seeks to present the Psalms in very simple, straightforward, contemporary English, understandable, he hopes, by contemporaries and by the young. The words of his version are moulded into a consistent pattern of rhyming verse. In the interest of sustaining this pattern, additional lines are deployed (in italics) which do not answer to any words of the original Hebrew. These additions are consistent with the surrounding material and may be characterised as like the (Aramaic) *Targums* of early Judaism. Jeffrey Cohen is no new Aquila. Rather, his style is in the Jerome tradition, but emphasized greatly, since his clear desire to convey the sense of every verse is normative.

I have not had time carefully to work through more than the first sixty of his psalms, but it is enough to conclude that it is a worthy, lively and instructive version of these ancient and ineffable poems. The easily accessible register of language, conveyed in probably the only poetic form known to those whom the author seeks to reach, is greatly effective. Overall, Cohen succeeds in reproducing the flow and integrity of the Hebrew original and, in the case of obscure and difficult verses in the Hebrew (and there are many), his judgment is remarkably consistent with up-to-date research. It is clear that he has made extensive use of many versions, ancient and modern, and the details are set out in his own Introduction.

Cohen's Psalms naturally maintain a proper and delicate Jewish flavour. But that in no way precludes their use by Christians. The high esteem in which Jerusalem, the Temple and its cult is held is easily spiritualized in the universally based prayers and aspirations of Christians. There is St. Paul's "Jerusalem which is above, the Mother of us all", and there is the argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The reference to and study of Israelite Kingship (as indicated by the Psalms) is important evidence for Christians regarding definitions of the person and nature of Jesus of Nazareth.

The intimate and plain language of this work probably suggests private, rather than public or liturgical use. That does not preclude its use in sermons or other occasions of religious instruction.

There is no doubting Dr Jeffrey Cohen's love of and devotion to the Psalms of David.

A.A. Macintosh

Acknowledgments

THIS RENDERING OF THE Book of Psalms is the culmination of a lifetime's exposure to its lyrical beauty and eloquence of expression, its incomparably moving, faith-inspiring and spiritually-energizing aura, as well as its most urgent summons to pursue the highest standards of religious, ethical and moral conduct. Selections from it have inspired and accompanied me for over seventy years in the context of my daily and festival prayers. It was when I went to theological College and launched myself into what was to become a lifetime's study of biblical texts and scholarship that I began to appreciate the variety, perplexity and depth of the psalms and to grapple with the many problems associated with the attempt to reconstruct their respective backgrounds and life-situations. For that I owe an eternal debt to my early teachers— notably, Mr Eli Cashdan and Professor Naphtali Wieder—for providing me with the necessary academic tools that have stimulated my literary creativity over the decades. As a lecturer at The University of Glasgow (1970-1980) I was further enriched and encouraged by my doctoral supervisor, the head of the Department of Hebrew, Professor John Macdonald, and by my fellow lecturer, Dr (later Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge University) Robert P. Gordon.

My fellow undergraduate student (and Best Man), Stefan Reif, later Director of the Cambridge Genizah Research Unit and Professor of Medieval Hebrew Studies, has remained a cherished friend and a reservoir of knowledge and advice. I would like to place on record my special thanks to him for his encouragement of and faith in this project and for having commended it to his fellow academics in Cambridge. In this context, my sincere appreciation is extended to Robert Gordon, Nathan Macdonald (Reader in the Interpretation of the Old Testament and lecturer in Theology, St John's College) and Andrew A. Macintosh (Dean of Chapel and

Director of Studies in Theology, St John's College), and to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. I would especially like to thank Dr Macintosh who, together with his former student, Rev Dr Cindy Eagle, subjected many of my psalms to critical assessment, giving me the benefit of their literary and scholarly observations. Sincere appreciation is also extended to Mr Philip Skelker, former teacher of English at Eton College and Head Teacher at King David School, Liverpool and Immanuel College, Bushey, UK., for proof-reading my pre-submission version and for many helpful suggestions. Thanks are also extended to the editorial team at Wipf & Stock, and particularly to Matthew Wimer and Ben Dieter, for their advice, patience and meticulous attention to detail.

No words can express the extent of my indebtedness to my wife, Gloria, who has lovingly tolerated my air of distraction throughout the decades of my studies, researches and publications, and who has been such an active and supportive pastoral partner in my various congregational ministries. The pleasure we have derived from our children, Harvey, Suzanne and Keith, Judith and Bob, Lewis and Suzanne, and our fourteen grandchildren, has also been the motivation for a life of contentment, gratitude to God, and peace of mind, which in turn served as a stimulus to my spiritual, literary and academic pursuits.

Introduction

The Problem of Translation

THE SCHOLARLY AND LITERARY endorsements of this work (see p. i–ii) provide an indication of the originality and pursuit of accuracy that has been my priority in this rendering of the biblical Book of Psalms into rhymed verse. It also provides corroboration of the fact that, although I profess the Jewish faith, my approach has been entirely non-denominational.

Rather than simply using one or more of the standard English translations as a basis for my poetic version, I have gone back to the original Hebrew text, analyzing every word and phrase in the light of the ancient, medieval and modern translations and commentaries which have been the starting points for my own interpretation.

The problem of translating this collection from the original Hebrew is that it is not always possible to determine precisely what the psalmist had in mind, or, in many instances, how the thought-process proceeds from one line or stanza to the next. Translators and commentators frequently confess this difficulty which is exacerbated by the fact that there are many words that occur only once in the Hebrew Bible (*hapax legomena*), and have to be guessed at from their context or inferred from similar words occurring in one of the cognate Semitic languages. This may be demonstrated at a glance with reference to the Bible edition of *The Jewish Publication Society* (Philadelphia, PA, 2000), which supplies brief footnotes listing every Hebrew rendering wherein “the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain.” In the case of the Book of Psalms it lists no fewer than 106 words or phrases where that uncertainty is manifest!

The translator cannot conveniently omit such problematic words or phrases, although some editions do precisely that! Any serious attempt at elucidation has not only to fit the immediate context but has also to be tenable semantically, either in relation to the three-letter root-meaning of the problematic Hebrew word or phrase, or as a derivative of a cognate Semitic language.

A further difficulty is posed by the necessity to render into English, or any other foreign language, an idiomatic expression in the original Hebrew. This is not only due to cultural, linguistic or geographical differences between the respective languages, resulting in the fact that no corresponding idiomatic expression may exist in the target language, but also because, “The meaning of many idioms results from the figurative extension of the original situation which is often unknown to most speakers” (See, Ghusoon Subhi Khalil, *www. Problems of translating idioms from foreign languages*, page 3; accessed 20/8/2017). Thus, any attempt to translate an idiom literally will prove either nonsensical or incomprehensible in most cases.

J. H. Breasted appositely refers to a problem encountered by translators attempting to provide an accurate version of the New Testament for the tribes of Alaska. When they sought to render the term ‘Good Shepherd’ they were stymied by the fact that those tribes had never seen a sheep or encountered the notion of a shepherd! (Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents*, 1. Chicago, Illinois, USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1906. Preface, ix.) Thus, because the psalms are replete with idiomatic expressions, translators are obliged to resort to a measure of paraphrase if they wish to convey accurately to their readers the essence of the psalmist’s original intention and frame of mind. It was only after completing this work and confronting this problem that I read the introduction to *The Cambridge Liturgical Psalter* (Aquila Books, Cambridge, 2012), whose editors sought to provide “a liturgy for public recitation and singing”—an objective not unrelated to that of providing a rhymed verse rendering.

Not surprisingly, they faced the identical problems of how to translate idiomatic Hebrew expressions and how to resolve the differences in length of lines between the two languages. The solution they describe in their introduction served precisely as my own guide:

On occasion, to give singers sufficient syllables to sing, we have added one or two words to a half-verse, but these have always been justifiable expansions of the meaning of the Hebrew.

The editors also admit that for the same reason they did not consistently employ the terms ‘God’ and ‘Lord’, and

have sometimes added an explanatory word, or offered a paraphrase or a double translation, to convey the full meaning in English.

Such an approach is even more necessary when facing the extra challenge of attempting to render the original into rhymed verse. Throughout this work I have struggled to employ paraphrase sparingly, though I remain optimistic that the general reader will be content to sacrifice literalness for the goal of creating a version that can stand on its own as a meditative and inspirational manual, conveying the joy, thanksgiving, fear or pathos, that invest the individual psalms, and the mood or situation of the psalmist as he gave poetic expression to his deepest feelings.

As a prelude to deciding on each rendering I consulted the main ancient versions (The Aramaic *Targum*, the Greek *Septuagint* and the Latin *Vulgate*), a wide variety of Hebrew and English commentaries, standard English translations, such as *The Authorized Version*, *Revised Standard Version*, *New English Bible*, etc., and some modern translations and commentaries, such as Berlin, Adele and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004; Parrish, V. Steven. *A Story of the Psalms: Conversation, Canon and Congregation*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Order of Saint Benedict, 2003; Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms*. New York/London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007; Frost, David L., John Emerton, Andrew Macintosh, *et al.*, eds. *The Cambridge Liturgical Psalter*. Cambridge, UK: Aquila Books, 2012.

THE PSALM-HEADINGS

The above difficulties are compounded when it comes to the issues of author attribution in the headings of some of the psalms as well as elucidation of some enigmatic references within the psalm-headings. Other than in the case of sixteen psalms, all are endowed with some superscription which seeks to provide information regarding either the putative author of the psalm, the occasion for which it was composed, its literary type, its melody, the musical instrument that should accompany it, or its liturgical use in the Temple. In some instances, the heading consists of a phrase which appears to be no more than the title of a popular hymn to which the psalm was to be sung. That these headings were not original but appended by some later editors or Temple musical directors may be inferred from the fact that

in the Greek version of the Septuagint (third-century BCE) a substantial number of the psalms are endowed with totally different headings.

It is generally assumed that the term *lam'natze'ah*, which occurs in fifty-five of the psalm-headings (and for which we have followed the rendering, 'For the Director'), refers to that particular musical director or choir master; and it is not inconceivable that the personal names of the individual maestros—which were subsequently omitted at the final redaction of the Book of Psalms—may have been inserted, following the term *lam'natze'ah*, at the top of their personal copies of the psalms they had selected to be included in the services they directed. Some scholars take the view that these particular *lam'natze'ah* psalms—"The Directors' Psalter"—constituted the prayer book of the synagogue in the Greek period (Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, Charles A Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1907, 664a).

The final editor of the Book of Psalms would have made his choice from among the collections housed in the Temple repository; and that eclectic nature of the book explains why we encounter considerable duplication of ideas, phrases and verses, often within the same psalm.

I have made no attempt to 'rush in where angels feared to tread,' by attempting to elucidate those abstruse psalm-headings, but have contented myself with merely transliterating the words as they appear. Similarly, I have entirely omitted inclusion of the word *selah*, notwithstanding that it occurs over seventy times in the Psalter. Various suggestions have been offered to explain the term, such as that it represents a musical notation indicating a place in the psalm at which the Temple choristers were instructed to raise their voices to crescendo. This connects the term to the Hebrew root *s-l-l*, 'to lift up,' from which the noun *sullam*, 'a ladder,' is derived. A Greek tradition, on the other hand, renders it as *diapsalma*, 'a musical interlude,' possibly suggesting a time for pause and reflection.

Other Hebrew headings that recur frequently are *Mizmor*, *Mikhtam* and *Maskil*. Although the noun *zimrah* ('melody; song of praise'), from the same root as *mizmor*, occurs a few times outside of the Book of Psalms (Ex 15:2; Is 12:2, 51:3; Am 5:23), the noun *mizmor*, found over fifty times in Psalms, curiously occurs nowhere else in the entire Bible. The popular rendering, 'psalm,' is derived from the Greek *psalmos*, a term whose basic meaning is, 'to pluck with the fingers,' and was applied to the creation of music on the harp. While this term is used to refer to any song sung in religious worship, it is to the contents of the Book of Psalms that this term

is generally applied, with the name ‘hymn’ being used more generically to describe the former.

The noun *Mikhtam* occurs as a designation of Pss 16 and 56–60. Although its precise meaning is unknown, a popular explanation associates it with the noun *ketem*, ‘fine gold,’ viewing it as a tribute to the superior quality of that psalm.

The name *Maskil* is applied to thirteen psalms: 32, 42, 44, 45, 52–55, 74, 78, 88, 89 and 142. It clearly derives from the root *s-kh-l*, meaning, ‘to instruct, be prudent, make wise,’ though it is difficult to sustain that nuance in relation to all the psalms to which it is applied. The verb is also found in the sense of ‘to be skilful,’ especially in the context of playing music (See II Chr 30:21–22); and this might suggest that the *Maskil*-psalms were sung to the accompaniment of a musical composition that was regarded as complex or difficult to play.

A less common heading is *Al ha-gittith* which is found in the heading of Pss 8, 81 and 84. Many scholars explain the term in relation to the word *Gat*, the name of the Philistine city, Gath, and assume that the psalm-heading represents an instruction that it should be sung to the accompaniment of the harp produced in that city. Others connect it with another meaning of the word *gat*, namely ‘a vine-press,’ and suggest that it was a psalm that was popularly sung to the accompaniment of the wine production.

The heading *Lehazkir* occurs only twice (Pss 38 and 70), and is also unclear. Its literal meaning is ‘to remember’ or ‘for a memorial,’ and may be a recommendation that the psalm be committed to memory as efficacious in time of need. Another suggestion was that the term implies that the psalm was written in order that God might *remember* the petitioner favourably. This is supported by the occurrence of the term *askarah*, ‘a memorial,’ in the context of the meal offering (Lev 2:2), where it appears to have had that same sense, that the offering would have the beneficial effect of God ‘remembering the petitioner favorably.’

Some of the psalm-headings include a reference to the event which inspired the original composition, such as, “A psalm of David, when he fled from before Absalom his son” (Ps 3); “A psalm. A song at the dedication of the house (Temple?)”: Ps 30); “A psalm of David when he feigned madness in the presence of Abimelekh who threw him out and he left” (Ps 34); and, “A Maskil of David when the Ziphites came and told Saul, ‘Know that David is hiding among us’” (Ps 54).

A poignant heading is *Al muth la-ben*, “On the death of a son” (Ps 9). Such a dirge-like melody would certainly suit the content of the latter psalm which contains such sentiments as, “He does not ignore the cry of the afflicted; He who requites bloodshed is mindful of them” (v 13), and, “Have mercy on me, Lord . . . You who lift me from the gates of death” (v 14). The heading (*Al*) *Alamoth* (Ps 46) is probably a combination of the words *Al* and *muth*.

More frequently among the psalm-headings we find a brief Hebrew phrase that seems to make little contextual sense, such as *Al shoshan-nim* . . . *Shir yedidoth*, literally, “On the lilies . . . A love song” (Ps 45). While in the latter case such a heading might be justified as an expression of the love and admiration felt by his subjects for the king, that sense could not be sustained for the other psalms that bear that same heading (Pss 60, 69 and 80). Ps 69, for example, is an out-pouring of unremitting anguish as the psalmist stares death in the face. A common view is that such abstruse phrases in the psalm-headings represent rather an allusion to the title of a popular song of the day, to the tune of which the psalm was to be sung. This would appear to be the case with the phrase *Al ayyelet ha-shahar* (“Deer of the Dawn”: Ps 22), which, otherwise, seems to bear no association to the theme of the psalm. The heading *Al tash’heth* (“Do not destroy”) of Pss 57–59, on the other hand, seems most appropriate to their content wherein the psalmist cries out at a time of crisis. It is understandable therefore that they would have been recommended to be sung to a melody that echoed that precise mood.

Other headings are believed to refer to the musical instruments to be used as accompaniment to the singing of those psalms. We have referred above to *Al ha-gittith*. In this category are the terms *Al ha-nehiloth* (Ps 5), perhaps derived from the noun *halil*, ‘a pipe’ or ‘flute’; *Al ha-sh’minith* (Pss 6 and 12), literally ‘On the Eight,’ and possibly a reference to the eight-stringed harp.

The precise sense of the heading *Al mahalath* (Pss 53 and 88), is difficult to determine as its root, *h-l-h*, has three unconnected meanings, ‘to be sick’, ‘to appease or entreat’, and ‘to adorn’. The ancient Greek versions of Aquila and Symmachus (second-century CE) render it as ‘For the dance’, which assumes a variant reading of the original Hebrew, namely *Al meholoth*, from the noun *mahol*, ‘a dance.’ The mood and contents of both psalms makes it extremely unlikely, however, that such psalms would have been accompanied by dancing!

We turn now to a group of fifteen psalms (120—134) that bear the superscription *Shir ha-ma'aloṭh*, literally, “A song of ascents.” The precise sense of the term is unclear, but the common view is that these were psalms recited or sung by pilgrims when wending their way ‘up’ to Jerusalem for the three main pilgrim festivals of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. However, although many of the psalms in this section are consistent with that setting, exuding a joyful spirit and a sense of profound pride in the beauty of Zion, six of them (Pss 120, 121, 123, 124, 130 and 131) make no reference to Zion or Jerusalem, or to the House of God as a reference to the Temple. Their theme is rather that of fear in the face of distress or trial, or, as in the case of Ps 121, an expression of faith and strong conviction that God would come to the psalmist’s aid and remove the looming peril. Ps 124, on the other hand, is a thanksgiving for divine aid in having defeated a violent enemy against all odds. It is difficult, therefore, to place those six psalms as a unit within the milieu of the pilgrims’ joyful repertoire!

Jewish tradition offers the alternative suggestion that the term *ma'aloṭh* (‘ascents’) derives from the fact that each succeeding psalm was sung by the Levitical choir as the priests made their way in procession each day along the fifteen Temple steps. This situation is also mirrored in Christianity wherein the name ‘Gradual’ (from the word meaning ‘step’ in Latin) is used to denote material from the Psalms recited as the reader ascends the Altar steps.

In Eastern Christianity those fifteen ‘Songs of ascents’ are also invested with special significance, and are read at Friday evening Vespers throughout the year. This liturgical borrowing from Judaism goes back to the early days of those respective faiths’ parting of the ways. In early Judaism it was the practice of *Hasidim*, members of religious fraternities, to rise at an early hour each day to attend synagogue in time to recite the entire Book of Psalms before the commencement of the morning service. This practice was taken over into early Christianity, although its recitation was spread over the entire week.

These psalms are especially popular in synagogue liturgical tradition. Ps 121 (“I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where will my help come?”) and Ps 130 (“Out of the depths I call You, O Lord. Listen to my cry; let Your ears be attentive to my plea for mercy”) are both prescribed for recitation by the congregation on behalf of any of its seriously ill members, or in a situation of local peril or national trial. Somewhat curiously—but understandably when we consider that it makes an almost seamless transition from

fear to the conviction that God's help and deliverance are at hand—Ps 121 is also the most popular choice for occasions of communal thanksgiving and celebration.

Ps 126, containing the sentiment that “those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy” (v 5), namely that, although the farmer may have meagre seed with which to sow, yet a bumper harvest is promised for him (v 6), is employed as the introduction to the Jewish Sabbath and Festival Grace After Meals. And Ps 128, containing the sentiment, “When you enjoy the fruit of your labors, happy and fortunate are you” (v 2), is recited as the closing psalm of the Service for the Conclusion of the Sabbath, as a prelude to the resumption of the working week.

Finally, the *Halleluyah!* collection. These are the ten psalms (106, 111—113, 135, 146—150) which either begin (Pss 111 and 112) or both begin and end (Pss 106, 113, 135, 146—150) with this interjection of praise of God. The early Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church pronounced the term as *Alleluia*, under the influence of the transliteration found in the Greek Septuagint version of the Psalms. It was used in these traditions in a variety of liturgical ways. In evangelical churches, it is particularly popular as a spontaneous expression of instinctive and powerful spiritual emotion and as an identification with a preacher's affirmation of belief and faith in God.

Few are unfamiliar with the word *Halleluyah!* This is largely due to its popularization by George Frideric Handel who included it as a repeated interjection throughout the climactic chorus to Part II of his most famous Messiah oratorio.

One of the most joyous collections of synagogue hymns, both in ancient Temple times and in Synagogue tradition to the present day, is known as *Hallel* (Pss 113—118). These are psalms of praise and thanksgiving which are sung with great gusto by prayer leader and congregation on all festival days and on *Rosh Hodesh*, the semi-festive occasion marking the appearance of the new moon and the inauguration of a new Jewish month. On Tabernacles, the harvest festival, worshippers wave palm branches in every direction to the accompaniment of the singing of verses from the *Hallel* psalms.

AUTHORSHIP OF THE PSALMS

Individual psalms were certainly composed long before our biblical collection achieved its present form. While both Orthodox Jewish and Christian traditions attribute the authorship of most of the psalms to King David (tenth-century BCE), the early scholars of The Higher Critical School

(eighteenth-nineteenth centuries CE) took the view that the psalms could not have been composed before the Judeans returned from exile in Babylon (around 538 BCE), and that most of them were in fact products of the Maccabean era (second-century BCE). This includes those psalms whose headings bear the name of King David.

Such an anachronistic attribution of Davidic authorship could indeed be explained against the background of the Pseudepigraphic Literature (from the Greek, *pseudes*, 'false,' and *epigraphe*, 'name' or 'attribution') composed in Judea between the period 300 BCE–300 CE. Many religious writers at that period believed that the most effective way of achieving authority, popularity and wide circulation for their works was to pass them off as having come down from biblical antiquity, and as having been authored by one its illustrious figures. Hence the existence of such works as *The Life of Adam and Eve*, *The Testament of Adam*, *The Book of Enoch*, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* (purporting to be the dying wishes of Jacob's twelve sons), *The Testament of Moses*, etc. The critical school explained in that same way the other psalm-headings which attribute authorship to Yeduthun, Moses, Solomon, Heman, Sons of Korah, Asaph and Ethan.



Seventy-three of the psalm-headings contain the Davidic attribution. If we add another two psalms (2 and 95) which the New Testament attributes to David, we arrive at a maximum of seventy-psalms, precisely half the collection, for which that claim was made. A psalm scroll discovered in Qumran attributes a further two psalms (104 and 123) to David, while some scholars took the view that there are a further twenty psalms which, while not bearing the Davidic superscription, yet reflect the circumstances, style, mood and vocabulary of many of the Davidic psalms. This still fell far short, however, of any internal corroboration of the blanket Davidic attribution of authorship of the entire psalter that the Orthodox traditions of both faiths maintained.

It was with J. H. Breasted's discovery and publication of an abundant literature of fourteenth-century BCE Egyptian psalmody at the beginning of the twentieth-century that the scholarly consensus regarding the dating of the psalms was turned on its head. It was now realised just how early Near Eastern psalmody was developed, that it was entirely plausible that the Israelite genre could indeed go back as early as the Davidic period, and that particularly the royal psalms (Pss 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132 and 144), which deal with the king's spiritual role in worship, might well

be traced back to David himself. This view was supported by such eminent authorities as J. Bittenwieser, J. A. Montgomery and H. Gressman. The fact that the Septuagint (third-century BCE) attributes to David many psalms that do not bear his name in the Hebrew version also suggests that his influence was more widely associated with that genre than is suggested by the Hebrew textual tradition.

THE APPEAL OF THE PSALMS

The Greek version of the Septuagint adds an additional psalm, making a total of one hundred and fifty-one, a Hebrew version of which was discovered in Qumran, while in the biblical Peshitta of some Middle Eastern Syriac churches their psalms were supplemented by a further four psalms. If we factor in the eighteen psalms contained in the Apocryphal work, *The Psalms of Solomon* (first-century BCE), and the contemporary *Hodayoth* (Thanksgiving Psalms) from Qumran, the picture emerges of a genre that won almost universal acceptance as *the* most appropriate source and format for liturgical, petitionary and meditational outpouring. Not surprisingly, the psalms provided the content and inspiration for the Judeo-Christian religious traditions, a popularity that has not waned to the present day.

The issue of their Davidic authorship, whether in whole or part, was mainly of academic concern. It was the mere fact that the ancient custodians of tradition credited King David, accurately or otherwise, with having pioneered that genre that gave it its undeniable spiritual authority and appeal in the eyes of the masses.

The Temple was the divinely ordained house of prayer, so the assumption must have been that King David, who is credited with having designed and laid the foundations for that Temple, would also have been divinely inspired to create its earliest liturgy in the form of the psalms. And that is how they became *the* most cherished source of spiritual inspiration as well as a worthy guide for all of life's vicissitudes. This was largely due to the variety of critical situations that King David had to confront, as chronicled in the Bible and within his psalms, and with which the simple worshipper could identify, and derive succour for his or her own predicament.

While the Five Books of Moses represented the blueprint for the religious way-of-life, the Book of Psalms portrays the struggles faced by people of faith against its many obstacles, notably the evil-doers and the violent who mock and pursue them for their religious integrity, while at the same time serving as a pressure-valve for their own doubts,

temptations and inner turmoil. The seemingly arbitrary division of the Psalter into five books would seem to represent a salute to the priority of the Torah and its five books, and may thus point to an understanding of a relationship between the two.

The appeal of the psalms was also due to the comfort that was drawn from their promise of ultimate victory for the pious oppressed, their certainty that goodness would be rewarded with God's grace, and impiety with His censure, and the opportunity that they offered the worshipper to home into, and sing along with, the paeans of praise, joy and thanksgiving as expressed with such beauty and passion by the grateful psalmist. With the introduction of rousing musical and choral accompaniment, the psalmist's own call to "serve God with joy" was amply fulfilled, and the therapeutic value of the psalms considerably enhanced.

This therapeutic dimension was highlighted by John Calvin (sixteenth-century French theologian) when he observed that the Book of Psalms "grants us the permission and freedom to lay open before God those of our infirmities that we would be ashamed to confess before men." Indeed, the psalmist taught the faithful how to address God, what to talk to Him about, how to share their inner thoughts and fears with Him, how to articulate their petitions in an appropriate manner, and, equally important, how to express thanks and gratitude. The Book of Psalms thus made a significant contribution to the cultivation of civility, gentility and refinement within the religious community.

While the biblical and other religious texts offered subject-matter and inspiration for the lessons or sermons in the houses of worship, the Psalter, with the variety of personal, communal and national situations that it chronicled, served, and continues to serve, as the standard resource for religious leaders seeking appropriate hymns for tailoring the liturgy to a wide variety of public occasions.

THE MAIN CATEGORIES OF PSALMS

A debt of gratitude is owed to Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), the pioneer in identifying the main *gattungen*, or 'categories,' of psalms represented in our Psalter. These include individual complaints or laments, individual psalms of thanksgiving, communal laments and communal thanksgivings. These were later expanded to include enthronement psalms and royal psalms. Since Gunkel, research into psalmody has progressed extensively, and there is much to occupy the interest and attention of scholar, teacher,

preacher or popular writer on the subject. The present writer found much inspiration and stimulus in his study of the literature in his far-off student days, in his Ministry, and even more so in his preparation of this work. But it is also the ordinary reader, who employs the psalms for prayer, praise or meditation, who will gain a far greater depth of understanding and a broader perspective of the background of the psalms by familiarizing him- or her-self with the scholarly literature.

Gunkel observed that the individual laments represent the largest category in the Book of Psalms, and that there are, in fact, few thanksgiving psalms. He explained this psychologically, given that human nature is generally quick to petition for needs, but readily forgets to offer thanks or appreciation for benefits bestowed. This could be rationalized, however, on the basis that most people have significantly more difficulties, setbacks and losses in their lives than significant triumphs that call for an instinctive recognition of God's direct intervention on their behalf.

Another charitable explanation for the preponderance of lament is that it is occasioned by the psalmist's strong conviction that God is our true and ready Savior, a reality to which countless individuals in his day —and ever after—have attested through their own experience. As the natural reaction to the many crises of life, the God-directed lament thus represents an affirmation of God's presence and an act of faith and confidence in His redemptive power. As the child instinctively cries out when hurt and in need of the parent's comfort, so do we cry out, complain of our pain, invoke our divine Parent's healing, help and guidance, and express our reliance on Him. The lament is thus a profound and indirect expression of pure faith.

THE METRIC TRADITION IN PSALMS

Translations of psalms into English first made their appearance during the sixteenth-century, and are associated, primarily, with the names of John Daye, Sir Philip Sidney, Margaret Sidney Herbert, Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins. Metrical psalms were introduced to encourage congregational singing. This was a dramatic departure from original practice where-in singing was the exclusive preserve of the clergy or church choir, or in closed fraternities, by monks and nuns.

The Reformation changed all that; and the establishment of the Anglican Church, with its English liturgy and the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), demystified the ritual and enabled the masses to participate in the joyful singing of hymns. This, in turn, encouraged gifted theologians,