

The Bay Psalm Book  
Preface

The singing of Psalms breathes out nothing but holy harmony and melody; but such is the subtlety of the enemy, and such is the enmity of our nature against the Lord and His ways, that our hearts can find discord in this harmony and notes of division in the holy melody. There are, concerning singing, three questions that have proved especially troublesome. First, which psalms should be sung in churches: the psalms of David and other biblical writers, or psalms composed by godly

and gifted men throughout the history of the church? Second, if we sing psalms from scripture, should we sing them in strictly literal translations, or should we use the metrical forms common in English poetry? Third, by whom are they to be sung? Should the whole church sing with voices together, or should one man sing alone while the rest join in silence and close by saying “amen”?

Regarding the first question: David’s psalms were certainly acceptable for worship, not only in his own time, but in succeeding ages such as that of Solomon (2 Chron. 5:13), of Jehosaphat (2 Chron. 20:21), and of Ezra (Ezra 3:10-11). In Hezekiah’s time, as 2 Chron. 29:30 makes evident, they were commanded to sing praise in the words of David and Asaph. This latter verse may indeed serve to resolve two of our questions (the first and the last) at once. In thinking about the passage, we need to determine whether the commandment was ceremonial or moral. Some components of it, such as the use of musical instruments, were indeed ceremonial; but what ceremony was there in singing praise with the words of David and Asaph? We might say David was a type of Christ: but then was Asaph as well? Was every aspect of David’s life typical of Christ? What about his words, which are of moral, universal, and perpetual authority in all nations and ages: are they merely typical? And what type can be imagined in Israel’s use of his songs to praise the Lord? If the songs were typical because the ceremony of musical instruments was joined with them, then Israel’s prayers were also typical, because they had the ceremony of

incense mixed with them: but we know that prayer was a moral duty, notwithstanding the incense, and so singing those psalms was a moral duty, notwithstanding their musical instruments. Those elements which were typical—that they were sung with musical instruments, by the 24 orders of the Priests and Levites (1 Chron 25:9)—must have moral and spiritual fulfillment in the New Testament, in all the churches of the saints (who are made kings and priests (Rev 1:6) and are the first fruits unto God (Rev. 14:4) as the Levites were (Num. 3:45)), who sing praise with hearts and lips instead of musical instruments and who are set forth (as some judiciously think) by 24 Elders in the ripe age of the church (Gal. 4:1-3; Rev. 4:4), thus answering to the 24 orders of Priests and Levites. All in the church, therefore, and not just some select members, are commanded to teach one another in the various sorts of David's psalms—some of them psalms composed by David himself [מזמורים], some of them hymns [תהילים], some of them spiritual songs [שירים]—so that, if the singing of David's psalms is a moral duty (and therefore a perpetual duty), then we under the New Testament are bound to sing them as well as they under the Old. And if we are expressly commanded to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, then either we must sing David's psalms, or else we must say they are not spiritual songs, these songs penned by an extraordinary gift of the Spirit, for the sake of God's spiritual Israel, not to be read and preached only (as other parts of the holy scriptures are) but to be sung as well. The psalms are, indeed, most spiritual, and still to be sung in all the Israel of God; and as their sin is grievous who allow David's psalms, as other scriptures, to be read in churches (which is one of their uses) but not to be preached as well (which is another of their uses), so cries unto God the sin of those who allow the psalms to be read and preached but seek to deprive the Lord of the glory of their third purpose, which is to be sung in Christian churches.

There are potential objections to these claims. The first is that the saints in the early church composed and compiled spiritual songs and sang them before the church (I Cor. 14:14-16). To this we answer, first, that the early saints compiled these spiritual songs by the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit (common in those days), gifts that enabled them to praise the

Lord in strange tongues (in which those psalms were uttered, as the learned Paraus proves in his comment on verse 14). If these extraordinary gifts were still in the churches, we should allow the saints similar liberty now. Second of all, suppose those psalms were sung by an ordinary gift (the question cannot likely be decisively settled): does it therefore follow that they did not, and that we need not, sing David's psalms? Must the ordinary gifts of private men quench the Spirit, who still speaks to us by the extraordinary gifts of His servant David? There is not, in the scriptures, the least footstep of example, precept, or rationale for such a bold practice.

A second objection is that, if ministers are allowed to pray prayers of their own composition, then why cannot we likewise sing psalms of our own composition? May we not sing in the spirit as well as pray in the spirit? To this we respond, first, that not every minister has a gift of spiritual poetry, which would enable him to compose extemporaneous psalms as he does prayer. Second, even if he did have such a gift, psalms are to be sung (as we shall prove) by a common consent and harmony of all the church in heart and voice, and this cannot be done unless he who composes a psalm brings his compositions, in some set form, into the church; and for this we find no warrant or precedent in any ordinary officers of the church throughout the scriptures. Third, the book of psalms is a complete system of psalms, which the Holy Ghost Himself in infinite wisdom has made to suit all the conditions, necessities, temptations, and affections of men in all ages (as most commentators on the psalms have fully and particularly made clear). By this fact the Lord seems to have stopped all men's mouths and minds from compiling or singing (with the excuse that the occasions and conditions of the church are new) any other psalms for the public use of the church. Let our condition be what it will: the Lord himself has supplied us with far better. Thus in Hezekiah's time, though there were undoubtedly men among them (such as Isaiah and Micah) who had extraordinary gifts to compile new songs for those new occasions, we read that they were commanded to sing in the words of David and Asaph, which were ordinarily to be used in the public worship of God. Those who are wise, we do not doubt, will easily see that those set forms of psalms of God's own institution—not of

man's conceived gift or human imposition—were sung in the Spirit by the holy Levites just as their extemporaneous prayers were prayed in the Spirit, the Lord having bound them to no set forms. Can set forms of psalms appointed by God not be sung in the Spirit now, as others did then?

But why, it may be asked, may not one compose a psalm and sing it alone with a loud voice while the rest join with him in silence and in the end say, “amen”? We answer that, even if such a practice was found in the church of Corinth when someone had a psalm suggested by an extraordinary gift, the whole church should, for the singing of ordinary psalms, join together in heart and voice to praise the Lord. Three considerations support this practice.

First, David's psalms (as has been shown) were sung in heart and voice together by the 24 orders of the musicians of the Temple, who were types of the 24 elders (all the members of Christian churches (Rev 5:8), who are made kings and priests to God to praise Him as they did). If there were any other order of singing choristers, besides the body of people, to succeed the Temple musicians, the Lord would doubtless have given direction in the New Testament for their qualification, election, and maintenance just as he did for the musicians of the Temple, and just as he has faithfully done for all other church officers in the New Testament.

Second, others besides the Levites (the chief singers) in the Jewish church also sang the Lord's songs: why else would they be commanded frequently to sing (as in Psalm 100:1-3, Psalm 95:1-3, and Psalm 102:18 and title)? Not only Moses but all Israel sang the song of Exodus 15; they “spoke saying,” as the original text says, all as well as Moses (v. 1), the women as well as the men (v. 20, 21). And in Deuteronomy 32 (to which some think John makes reference, along with Ex. 15:1, when he sees the Protestant churches getting the victory over the Beast with harps in their hands and singing the song of Moses, Rev. 15:3), Moses sings a song which he is commanded to put not only into their hearts but also into their mouths (Deut. 31:19). The command suggests that they were to sing it together with their mouths as well as with their hearts.

Third, Isaiah foretells that, in the days of the New Testament, God's watchmen and desolate lost souls (signified by waste places) will with their voices sing together (Isa. 52:8, 9). In Rev. 7:9 and 10, the song of the Lamb is sung by many together, and the Apostle expressly commands the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs not to any select Christians, but to the whole church (Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16). Paul and Silas sang together in private (Acts 16:25), and must the public hear only one man sing? To all these scriptural examples we may add the practice of the primitive Churches. The testimony of ancient and holy Basil is that many sang (*Epist.* 63). When one of us, he says, has begun a psalm, the rest of us set in to sing with him, all of us with one heart and one voice; and this, he says, is the common practice in the churches of Egypt, Lybia, Thebes, Palestine, Syria, those that dwell on Euphrates, and generally every place where the singing of psalms is of any account. To the same practice Eusebius gives witness (*Eccles. Hist.* lib 2. cap 17).

The objections made against the practice of joining to sing both in heart and in voice are that, by this practice, others out of the church will sing, that we are not always in a suitable condition to sing the works at hand, and that all cannot sing with understanding. But should not all therefore who have understanding join in heart and voice together? Are not all the creatures in the heaven, the earth, the seas—men, beasts, fishes, and fowls—commanded to praise the Lord, though none of these but men, and godly men too, can do it with spiritual understanding?

As for the scruples of some regarding the translation of the psalms into meter (because David's psalms were sung without meter), we answer thus:

First, there are many verses, in various psalms of David, that run in rhythms (as those who know the Hebrew can testify and as Buxtorf shows, *Thesau.* pa. 629); this feature shows, at least, the lawfulness of singing psalms in English rhythms.

Second, the psalms are penned in verse forms that are suitable to the poetry of the Hebrew language, and not in the common style of such other Old Testament books as are not poetic. Now, no Protestant doubts that all the books of the scripture should, by God's

providential decree, be available in the mother tongue of each nation, so that they may be understood by all. Thus the psalms should be translated into the English tongue; and if in English we are to sing them, then, as all English songs run in meter according to the fashion of English poetry, so should David's psalms be translated into meter, so that we might sing the Lord's songs both in our English tongue and in such commonly metrical verses as are familiar to an English ear. And just as no good conscience can justly be offended by singing David's Hebrew songs in English words, so should no conscience be offended by singing his poetic verses in English poetic meter. Men might as well stumble at singing the Hebrew psalms in our English tunes (and not in the Hebrew tunes) as at singing them in English meter (which are our verses) and not in such verses as are generally used by David according to the poetry of the Hebrew language. The truth is that, as the Lord has hidden from us the Hebrew tunes (lest we should think ourselves bound to imitate them), so has He hidden (for the most part) the form and movement of their Hebrew poetry, so that, instead of thinking ourselves bound to imitate the Hebrew, every nation without scruple might follow both the gravest tunes of its own songs and the gravest verses of its own poetry.

Nor should anyone think that we have, for the sake of meter, taken the liberty or poetic license to depart from the true and proper sense of David's words in the Hebrew verses. No indeed: it has been part of our religious care and faithful endeavor to keep close to the original text.

As for other objections regarding the difficulty of Ainsworth's tunes and the corruptions in our common psalm books, we hope they are answered in this new edition of psalms, which we here present to God and His churches. For although we have cause to bless God in many respects for the religious endeavors of the translators who have rendered the metrical psalms usually annexed to our Bibles, it is nonetheless well-known to godly and learned men that: 1) they have presented a paraphrase rather than the words of David translated according to the rule of 2 Chron. 29:30; 2) their additions to and detractions from the words are not seldom and rare, but are quite

frequent and, many times, needless (they would, we suppose, not be approved of if the psalms were translated into prose); and 3) their variations of the sense and too-frequent alterations of the sacred text might justly offend those who are able to compare the translation with the text. And since others have been grieved by these failings (as some judicious men have often complained), it has been generally desired that—as we enjoy the others—so we should (if it be the Lord’s will) enjoy this ordinance in its native purity. We have therefore tried to make a plain and familiar translation of the psalms and words of David into English meter, and we have not presumed to paraphrase in order to give the sense of his meaning in words that are not his; we have thus looked to the original as our chief guide, shunning all additions except such ones as the best prose translators supply, and avoiding all significant detractions from words or sense. The word [and], which we translate *and*, is redundant sometimes in the Hebrew, so sometimes (though not very often) it has been left out; but not if the sense is distorted by its absence.

For our translations, we have joined our English Bibles (to which, next to the original, we have looked for guidance) in using the idioms of our own language instead of Hebraisms, lest they might seem to be English barbarisms.

Synonyms we have used interchangeably, such as *folk* for *people*, and *Lord* for *Jehovah*, and sometimes (though seldom) *God* for *Jehovah*; for this practice (as for some interpretations of places cited in the New Testament) we have scriptural authority (Ps. 14 with Ps. 53; Heb. 1:6 with Ps. 97:7). Where a phrase is doubtful, we have rendered it in the way that (in our own apprehension) is most genuine and edifying.

Sometimes we have contracted, sometimes dilated the same Hebrew word, for the sake of both the sense and the meter. We do not conceive such dilation to be a periphrastic addition any more than we conceive the contraction of a true and full translation to be an unfaithful detraction or diminution: as we may dilate *who healeth* and say *he it is who healeth*, so may we contract *those that stand in awe of God* and say *God-fearers*.

Finally, because some Hebrew words have a fuller and more emphatic signification than

any one English word can or does express, we have done that which faithful translators sometimes do: we have translated not only the word but the emphasis of it, as *mighty God* for *God* [אל], *humbly bless* for *bless* [ברך], *rise to stand* for *stand* (Ps. 1); and *truth and faithfulness* for *truth*. But for the sake of meter, sometimes we avoid this practice and render the word truly though not fully, as when we say *rejoice* for *shout for joy*.

As for all other changes of number, tense, and other distinct features, they are such changes as either Hebrew will unforcedly bear or English forcibly calls for; or they are changes that in no way change the sense and are printed, usually, in another character.

If the verses, therefore, are not always as smooth and elegant as some may desire or expect, let them consider that God's altar does not need our polish (Ex. 20). We have chosen to respect a plain translation rather than smooth our verses with the sweetness of paraphrase: and thus we have honored conscience rather than elegance, fidelity rather than poetry, in translating the Hebrew words into the English language and David's poetry into English meter;

that so we may sing in Zion the Lord's  
songs of praise according to His own  
will; until He take us from hence,  
and wipe away all our tears, and  
bid us enter into our Master's  
joy to sing eternal  
Hallelujahs.