

The Complete Book of Psalms for Singing with Study Notes

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This psalter is put out by the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia and was largely under the direction of Rowland Ward. Two distinct thoughts came to my mind as I looked through this psalter: first that it is apparent it is a labor of love. Second, that it feels somehow cobbled together. I was not certain what to expect with this psalter and found myself surprised in a couple of instances. For example, it is far more of a compilation from other psalters than a new translation. It is available from [Crown and Covenant Publications](#).

Background

The preface states that even though there still remain churches that hold to exclusive psalmody, these churches are slow to provide fresh renderings, in current English, to share with the wider church. It is my impression that it was out of a recognition that the Scottish Metrical Version (SMV) is dated and that some modern versions are more of paraphrases, that led Mr Ward to attempt the publication of this psalter. He states that these selections have been put together with a view to accuracy, and for the most part I believe he succeeded, although it is largely the compilation of previous psalters instead of his own composition.

Format

The book comes hard bound with two ribbon strips for marking. Inside are plenty of appendices and at the front an explanation of the psalter and

the use of metrical psalms. Also included are brief (single-paragraph) notes on each of the psalms which gives an explanation and ties it into the New Testament with cross-references. These are especially helpful and I liked the idea very much.

The paper is of reasonable quality, presumably it was to make the book thinner but I find it has a little too much bleed-through from the other side to really suit me. Perhaps if a whiter paper were used instead of grey that would help with the contrast. It is here though that the “cobbled” nature of the psalter is really evident. There does not appear to be any consistency in formatting. The general format is to have two bars of notes on top with the words in stanzas underneath but sometimes the notes are on the left page and words on the right. Some times the words are in double-column, sometimes the words go from the right page to the top of the next page, with music underneath them instead of at the top of the page. Sometimes it transitions from single to double-column. It is not the most elegant arrangement.

From what I can tell, the psalms are printed in their entirety instead of portions, though occasionally a psalm will have a portion in addition to the full psalm. Though I am not certain why, sometimes the portion comes after the full psalm, and sometimes comes before, as with Psalm 72, where verses 17–18 are “version A” and the entire Psalm is “version B”.

Translation

The preface states

The translation is a rendering in international English, with reasonably natural word-flow, rhymed in about 50% of cases. A conservative approach to textual problems has been adopted, novelty for its own sake avoided, and a real effort made to render into a metre which respects the structure of the particular psalm and enables logical units to be of singable length. . . Compression or expansion of the parallel parts of a verse has sometimes been necessary, but care has been taken to convey the meaning with fidelity. In respect of overall accuracy, a considerable improvement on most earlier psalters has been gained by avoiding large additions of paraphrase that waken the force of the original. Care has been taken to render the Divine names accurately:

Elohim, El, etc.	God, Strong One, Almighty
Yahweh	(gracious/covenant LORD, GOD, God of grace, Jehovah)
Adonai	Lord, sovereign Lord

However, it should be noted that most of the words are not original to Mr Ward. They are actually a compilation from other psalters. The appendices list several sources which include the 1650 Scottish Psalter, the 1880 Irish

Psalter (lightly revised version of the SMV), the United Presbyterian Psalter of 1912, the RPCNA Book of Psalms with Music of 1950, the RPCNA Book of Psalms for Singing of 1973, the PCEA Psalms for Singing of 1983, the Anglo-Genevan Book of Praise of 1984, and the CRCNA Psalter Hymnal of 1984. Some of these have been modified, or corrected from their sources and about 10% seem to be original compositions of Mr Ward's. In my brief perusal of them they seem to be pretty close in accuracy, even if the language seems a little unpolished at times. And because it came from different sources it becomes a strange amalgamation where sometimes "thee" is used and sometimes it is not, sometimes "hath" is used and sometimes "has".

Music

For the most part, the music selections seem appropriate and I appreciate that tunes were chosen which represent the mood of the psalm but are also not terribly difficult to sing. Most were familiar to me from other psalters. I did think it odd that Psalm 137 was set to *Melita* (users of the maroon *Book of Psalms for Singing* will recognize it as the tune of 84B, "Advancing still from strength to strength"). I usually think of that as a rousing tune and dashing infants against stones does not fit in my mind.

The music format is once again, somewhat cobbled. It looks as though it was taken from multiple sources and the shape of the notes, the vocal range, and the formatting of the bars varies from page to page. I almost get the impression that this psalter was pieced together by hand using scissors and a copier.

Midi files are available from the [church's website](#).

Conclusions

I can appreciate the work that Mr Ward did on this. I like the idea of trying to strive for accuracy, but I question the method. I also really appreciate the notes on the psalms at the beginning and think they are a valuable addition to the psalter. But generally this feels like the love-labor of an individual and not the polished work of a denomination. It feels inconsistent and pieced together and while it may have its use, unfortunately, it is doubtful it stands a chance of becoming widely used or of being a classic.