

The Evangelical Repository and Bible Teacher

Volume LVI, 1879

PSALMODY

by Robert Stewart

An article with the above title from a Presbyterian in the South, who signs himself "M. N. R.," lately appeared in *The Presbyterian* of this city. Under a series of propositions it presents what, in the writer's judgment, are the conclusions attained with some degree of certainty in the controversy about the matter of praise in God's worship. These conclusions, are, of course, adverse to our position on the subject; and, though in many particulars grossly unjust, the mode of presentation is plausible, and calculated to encourage in the practice of hymn-singing those who are at all inclined in that direction. Answers offered by members of other churches were rejected by *The Presbyterian*, but a reply was lately published from one of its own pens over the signature, "G. W." This is conceived in a kind spirit, and presents the position of Psalm-singing denominations with all desirable fairness.

Only two points of the first article will be noticed here. The writer says:

"It is pleasant to know that no man, who understands the use of words, now calls for an inspired Psalmody. There is but one such book on earth, and that is inaccessible to nearly the whole world—it is the Hebrew Psalter. No translation of any Psalm or Book of Scripture is inspired. It is an abuse of language. It is folly for any man to claim inspiration for Rouse, or for any other learned and good man in modern times, who has tried to aid the church of God in singing the praises of Jehovah."

On this point we remark,

First, that if "no translation of any Psalm or Book of Scripture is inspired," in any proper sense of the term, then it is wrong to call our English Bible inspired, or to give it such titles as Holy Bible, Sacred Scriptures, or Word of God. And yet, if we mistake not, the writer himself so designates it in the article before us. Certainly such language has often been used without the least suspicion of impropriety, ever since we had a version of God's word. Almost every sermon that has been preached, and every book illustrating the Bible that has been written, would need to be remodeled to secure its accordance with the peculiar theory of this word-critic.

Secondly, We have Scripture authority for just such a use of language as that which the writer condemns. In quoting from the Old Testament, New Testament writers never give the original Hebrew; and yet they have no scruples about prefixing to a Greek translation such expressions as, "It is written," "The Scripture saith," "Esaias saith," "Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet," "So hath the Lord commanded us," "He saith," "He spake after this manner," "God said," "Who didst speak through the

mouth of thy servant David," etc. This is the uniform practice of Matthew, Luke, John, Peter, James, and of Christ himself. Nor did they hesitate to employ such language even when the Septuagint, from which they usually quoted, departed somewhat from the original text, and presented what we now call a free translation. Indeed the book of Psalms itself, about which is our special controversy, seems to be particularly designated as the word of Christ, although reference is had primarily, we suppose, not to the original Hebrew, but to the prevalent Greek version of the day.

Nor again is any one misled by such a use of terms. As "G. W." says, "all that is meant by an inspired psalmody in English is a faithful translation of the inspired Psalms as opposed to a mere imitation or loose paraphrase, or such a perversion as Dr. Watts gives of the one hundred and ninth Psalm." It is not meant that such a version gives the exact words written by inspired penmen, but that it presents a faithful reproduction of the thought and the order of thought which they were directed to record—such a reproduction as is adapted to the race and the end for which it is designed. Everybody understands this. It is folly to assert anything else; it is worse than folly to throw dust in men's eyes by its denial, and thus pander to the cravings of prejudice.

Nor again does this admission, to any extent, weaken our argument in favor of Scripture psalmody, as "M. N. R." seems to think, or at least wants others to think. You might as well talk of our duty to search the English Scriptures and follow them as God's word, to the exclusion of every human substitute, being lessened or multiplied by the fact that they are not the original Greek and Hebrew text, as to deny our obligation to use exclusively a faithful translation of the book of Psalms in God's praise, simply because it is a translation, and not the original text. God commands all—even the unlearned—to study his word. For this purpose he has sanctioned translations of Scripture into the vernacular tongue. So he has also commanded us to sing Psalms; and the change of these into a language and a form suitable for the end in view, is nothing more than a simple compliance with his will. Those who use such a version are obeying the divine command. They have an inspired psalmody.

But the writer referred to introduces another paragraph into his article which we feel inclined to notice, though it be briefly. It is this:

"The book of praise now in use by the United Presbyterian Church of this country, and by some of the Associate Reformed Churches at the South, does, in effect, fully concede the ground formerly taken by some, viz.; that we are bound to praise God in words as nearly as possible those of a literal translation of the Psalms, and in no other words. This is manifest in many parts of the book, as has been abundantly shown by Mr. Rentoul. It is not possible to convince or persuade men that the various versions used by these excellent brethren are at all less human productions than the versions of Lyte, Sternhold and Hopkins, Montgomery, Watts, and many others. If we are bound to the most literal translation, then we must return to the ancient method of chanting the Word of God, and so avoid the difficulty arising from a metrical version."

Three statements seem to be made or implied here: That once Psalm singers adhered consistently to the principles of their profession—that United Presbyterians and some others have virtually departed from them—and that in order to carry them out properly, chanting must be practiced.

On these statements we may remark:

First. That if chanting were the only way of faithfully carrying out the divine command on this subject, no support could be drawn therefrom in favor of a departure from the principle of an inspired psalmody. It would only be an argument in favor of a change of practice on the part of those who use something else besides a prose version.

Secondly. The author seems to contradict his last statement when he admits that Psalm-singers once faithfully adhered to the principles of their profession. Never, as far as we are aware, did they confine themselves to a prose version and chanting, to the exclusion of a metrical translation and other kinds of music. They only demanded that their Version should be "more smooth and agreeable to the text than any heretofore."

Thirdly. If United Presbyterians and some of the Associate Reformed Churches at the South have departed in practice from their original position by the adoption of revised and new versions, the departure has been one of ignorance alone. They certainly did not design any such departure. They are as prepared as ever to maintain their principle on this question. They are ready, when convinced of error in practice, to retrace their steps, But

Fourthly. We claim that the "Revised Psalms" are a faithful translation of the original, and that their use in the sanctuary as matter of praise is not inconsistent with 'the obligation to use an inspired psalmody. That they are not slavishly literal is admitted; that they are imperfect presentations of the original will not be denied. But such is the case even with the best prose version. Our English Bible admits foreign words, and exhibits, more or less, a free rendering. Sometimes, indeed, this flexibility of statement is absolutely necessary to express the idea of the original and bring it home with full force to the mind and heart. And especially is this so when poetical forms are adhered to, as they ought to be in a rendering of the Psalms; for not only have these Psalms in Hebrew a poetical dress, but the ordinary laws of music require that matter intended for singing should have a measured, rhythmical cadence. In spite, however, of any lack of literalism, which, necessarily or unnecessarily, may characterize our version of the Psalms, we claim that they are still a faithful translation, and the best, all things considered, to be found in the English language. Certainly they are "more smooth" than those which they superseded. In some cases, too, they are "more agreeable to the text"—more so, indeed, than perhaps some of our prose versions are. And in no case do they ever reach that paraphrastic wildness of rendering which may be justly attributed to the "imitations" of Dr. Watts and some other poets. Those who use them, we may therefore again confidently assert, are honestly carrying out God's command in regard to this part of divine worship. They do use a Scripture, an inspired, psalmody.