

# The Psalter of 1912

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## “The Psalter” of 1912

This psalter is still available, and still widely used, primarily in CRC and PRC circles as closely as I can gather. It has the prestige of being a joint effort of 9 denominations, according to its introductory note. In many respects it was an improvement over the lack of fluidity in earlier psalters, but from my standpoint its usefulness is severely marred by its translational methodology.

### Background

Much of my history comes from J.C.K. Milligan’s paper in *The Psalms in Worship*, edited by John McNaugher.

In 1871 the United Presbyterian Church (not very long after it was organized in 1858) published a revised version of the metrical psalter. I have a copy and while I have not thoroughly examined it my general impressions were that the main effort was to update the Scots Metrical Version (SMV) of 1650 in order to make it more fluid and easy to sing. General impressions show that generally this was accomplished while effort was still made to keep as close to Scripture as possible.

In 1879, the Irish Assembly adopted a revision, and in 1889 the American Reformed Presbyterian Synod also issued a revised version, giving four versions in use at the time between different Presbyterian churches.

While the United Presbyterians seem to have been satisfied with theirs, they had a desire for uniformity with other Psalm singers and in 1893 started a movement between 9 churches and a committee of 23 members from them. The first meeting was in 1901 and they met twice a year to compare individual studies and verses, meeting about nine sessions, 10 hours a day, for 10 or 15 days at each session.

## Translation Practices

According to Milligan, the committee was

charged to keep close to the original text, to conform to the language of the Authorized and Revised translations, to avoid extended paraphrases, to provide a variety of meters, and to express the inspired thought with chasteness and elegance of style in accordance with modern standards and tastes. It has been well said that a translation ‘must not be so literal as to convert rich prose into poor verse, not so faithful as to be punctilious in interpretations, nor yet bound to the Hebrew idioms, while preserving the precise form and color of the inspired sentiment.’

Which is where I would found myself in disagreement. And indeed this seemed to be the case because Milligan then says that it was on this point that the joint committee “met their greatest hindrance to harmonious action.” Little wonder. If I remember correctly, the American Reformed Presbyterian Synod left over this and instead republished their 1889 version. He continues

some shuddered at every word of the original that was omitted, and trembled for the Ark when a word or phrase was added to the text; and yet one or the other must be done or the work would stop.

Their methodology included keeping the names of some nations when they felt this history was important (Ammon, Amalek, Philistia), and in other cases just changed it to a more generic “nations far and near”. Milligan also says this with respect to God’s name:

Jehovah is so often Jesus, ‘whose name every tongue should confess,’ that this name might well be represented by ‘Jesus’ instead of ‘Lord’ or ‘God’; and the use of that precious name would make the Psalms more acceptable to a multitude of Christians, and would obey the divine injunction, ‘whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.’

I disagree with the above statement and use of the verse. Nevertheless, this explains somewhat the use of the name of Christ throughout this psalter. While I do believe many of these passages are indeed talking about Christ (in light of New Testament exposition), doing this loses the historical meaning where it talks about the original David as well. Rather than a double-meaning (David and Christ) we get only a single meaning. I would think if this practice were warranted, the apostles would have used the name of Jesus in their quotations of the Psalms. I understand there was a push to make

the Psalms more palatable to the congregations that already sung hymns as well (Milligan intimates that there were hymn-singers on the committee). Unfortunately it seems like they made them so agreeable that there was less of a distinction between the two and people wondered why they should stick with the limitations of the Psalms. If we are going to change them and make them palatable anyway, why use them at all?

Some phrases were also made more palatable to the sensitive modern ear and we find Psalm 137 referring not to dashing infants on stone, but “How happy he who shall repay the bitter hatred of her foe.”

## Music

For uniformity, the committee usually had one version of the psalm, and the music is probably the best feature of this psalter, in addition to the smoothness they strove for.

## Conclusions

I believe Milligan is correct in extolling the literary excellence of *The Psalter*. It has a pleasant sound to the ear, many of the tunes are well-chosen and married to the text. Unfortunately, as Robert Copeland said in the introduction to *The Book of Psalms for Worship* it “...forthrightly valued elegance and aesthetics over fidelity to the Hebrew text. It simply omitted psalm portions the committee thought tasteless or sub-Christian.”

Milligan says

Possibly it is too free for us, and too literal for liberal hymn-singers. Examine it closely, and mark all its failings; but consider it mainly as an introduction of the Psalms to those who have long used the hymns exclusively. The Committee earnestly aimed to make it acceptable to all parties, and the merits of the work are specially due to the zeal and ability of our hymn-singing brethren.

If history is any teacher, it seems that this compromise was devastating, as even the United Presbyterian Church had left exclusive psalmody within a decade or two. It certainly is enough to give one cause for reflection. This psalter might have its place, but that place is not in worship in my mind and I will avoid it for something more faithful.