

# INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALTER

BY THE REV. JOHN HENRY BLUNT, D.D.<sup>1</sup>

## § 1. *The Manner of using the Psalms in Divine Service.*

WHETHER or not the Psalms were all primarily composed for use in Divine Service, it is certain that many of them were so; that all were collected together for that purpose by those who had charge of the services offered up to God in the Temple; and that they were taken into public devotional use by the early Christian Church after the example of the Jewish.

Psalms were composed and sung by Moses, Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah; but it may be reasonably supposed that the constant use of them in Divine Service originated with David, the “sweet singer of Israel,” whose pre-eminence as an inspired Psalmist has caused the whole collection to be called after his name, “the Psalms of David.” To him was assigned the work and honour of preparing the materials out of which the Temple was to be built; and to him also the honour of preparing the materials of that Divine Psalmody which was henceforth ever to mingle with the worship of Sacrifice, and form the substance of the praises offered to God throughout the world. It seems even as if the very earliest Liturgical use of Psalms was recorded in the statement, “Then on that day David delivered first *this psalm* to thank the Lord into the hand of Asaph and his brethren,” on occasion of the ark of God being brought to its home of ages on Mount Zion [I Chron. xvi. 7]. It is true that the words “this psalm” are not in the original, and that the psalm afterwards given is a cento of the 105th, the 96th, and other Psalms which are considered by modern critics to belong to a much later date than that indicated; but there can be no doubt that David had been inspired to compose some of his psalms long before, and that when “he appointed certain of the Levites to . . . thank and praise the Lord God of Israel . . . to give thanks to the Lord, because His mercy endureth for ever” [I Chron. xvi. 4. 41], he was initiating on Mount Zion that system of liturgical psalmody, which (even if it had existed in any form previously) was now to continue there until it was taken up by the Christian Church. The establishment of this system in the Temple is recorded with similar exactness in 2 Chron. vii. 6, “And the priests waited on their office the Levites also with instruments of musick of the Lord, which David the king had made to praise the Lord, because His mercy endureth for ever, when David praised by their ministry.” And in a previous chapter the advent of the Divine Presence is connected in a remarkable manner with the first offering of such praises in the Temple: “It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord; and

<sup>1</sup> From *The Annotated Book of Common Prayer: Being an Historical, Ritual, and Theological Commentary on the Devotional System of the Church of England.* New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1903.

# Introduction

when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the Lord, saying, For He is good: for His mercy endureth for ever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord. So that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God” [II Chron. v. 13, 14]. Thus in the dedication of the Temple, we see the final settlement of the system of praise originated (as it seems) by David at the triumphant entry of the ark of God to Mount Zion; and in “the Levites which were the singers, all of them of Asaph, of Heman, of Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, arrayed in white linen,” we see the Jewish original of those surpliced choirs by which the same Psalms of David have been sung in every age of the Christian Church.

The hundred and fifty Psalms of the Christian Psalter were, however, the growth of perhaps six centuries, extending from David to Ezra and Nehemiah; and hence only a portion of those we now sing were used in the Temple of Solomon, although all were so used in the four centuries which preceded the Advent of our Lord, and the supersession of the Jewish by the Christian Church. This gradual growth of the Psalter led to that division into five parts which is so evident in its structure, and which is also noticed by some of the Fathers who lived near to the time of its use in the Temple. Doxologies are found at the end of the 41st, 72nd, 89th, and 106th Psalms, and these are considered to point out the division of the Psalter into five books, partly according to the date of their composition, and partly with reference to some system of Liturgical use. But notwithstanding these divisions, there is an equally evident union of all the books into one by means of the first Psalm, which forms a general introduction or Antiphon, and the last which forms a general Doxology, to the whole number.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>. Modern critics have analyzed the Book of Psalms with great minuteness. The general result of the conclusions arrived at by Hengstenberg, Mr. Thrupp, and others, may be shortly stated thus:

| BOOKS. | PSALM.                                  | AUTHORSHIP.   | WHEN, OR BY WHOM COLLECTED FOR USE IN THE TEMPLE. |
|--------|---|---|---|
| I.     | 1 - 41.                                 | David.  | David.  |
| II.    | {<br>42 - 49.<br>50.<br>51 - 71.<br>72. | The Levites.  | } In the time of<br>Hezekiah.                     |
|        |   | Azariah.  |   |
|        |   | David or Solomon.                                     |   |
| III.   | {<br>73 - 85.<br>86.<br>87 - 89.        | The Levites.  | } In the time of<br>Josiah.                       |
|        |   | Hezekiah.   |   |
|        |   | The Levites.  |   |
| IV.    | 90 - 106.                               | Various writers, incl. Moses, the Prophets, and Ezra. | Ezra or Nehemiah.                                 |
| V.     | 107 - 150.                              |   |   |

But the prophetic aspect of David’s office as the chief of Psalmists seems to be too little regarded in the latter part of this classification; and probably many psalms were written by him – such as the “Songs of Degrees” – which are here assigned to later authors.