

THE NEW LATIN PSALTER

IN writing about the new Latin translation of the Hebrew Psalter there is a temptation (to which I see some have yielded) to use some such title as *Psallite sapienter*; then one can follow up the title with St Augustine's commentary on these words: 'David here teaches us to sing the psalms intelligently, to seek rather the heart's enlightening than the sounds that strike the ear'. But under the circumstances I thought I had better first look up the 46th Psalm in the new translation, and there I found that I should have fallen at the very first fence. The phrase does not appear; it is *psallite hymnum* instead.

You see how warily we shall have to walk, if the new translation becomes official, both in quoting the psalms and the Fathers' commentaries on the psalms. Not only that, but we shall have to say farewell to many of our favourite verses: such verses as have, rightly or wrongly, nourished the piety of the faithful ever since Latin became the common language of the Western Church. No longer will the priest be able to pour out his soul at the foot of the altar with the words *Introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*. There is no mention of anybody's youth in that verse, apparently. And, *horribile dictu*, we may have to begin the canonical hours not with the gloriously resounding *Deus in adiutorium meum intende* but with the more modest if more correct *Placeat tibi Deus ut eripias me*.

There are so many differences between the new Psalter and those used by the Latin Church for about eighteen centuries that baffling questions are bound to arise in the minds of some who are not familiar with the problems involved. Without a doubt all who use the Latin Psalms as the main food of their daily prayer in the recital of the Divine Office must often have wished that they were a little more intelligible. But now some may feel inclined to ask: if this is what the psalms really mean, why have we had to wait so long to find out? We have often heard, they may say, that Rome is proverbially slow: but eighteen hundred years . . . ! What have the Scripture scholars been doing in the meantime? And could St Jerome have been so great a master of the Scriptures if his twentieth century disciples have now had to correct him in so radical a fashion? It is to answer such questions as this that the book under review has appeared.¹ Its author is the rector of the Biblical Institute of the Jesuit Fathers in Rome; he and his colleagues are responsible for the new translation. The work was undertaken at the Pope's commission some years ago, and in 1945 Pius XII issued a *motu proprio*

¹ *Le Nouveau Psautier Latin*. By Augustin Bea, S.J. (Desclée Brouwer, Paris.)

granting permission for the new Psalter to be used by those bound to the Divine Office. It may be concluded, I imagine, that this permission was intended to provide what may be called a trial run of the new translation in order to test its value and workableness. The ultimate intention seems to be that it should supersede the Latin Psalter in present use, should it prove satisfactory from the point of view of erudition and liturgical requirement. But as the old Psalter has held almost undisputed sway for so many centuries, whatever its merits or defects, it seems hardly likely that ecclesiastical authority will be over-precipitate in imposing the new one. And this seems all the less likely when we consider the far-reaching changes that will be necessary in missal, breviary and liturgical books, to say nothing of the problems that will arise about sacred music. To tell the truth, the introduction of a new Psalter like this would cause something of a liturgical revolution.

Some will say that this would be a small price to pay for a version of the psalms which would enable us to say our Office with more profit. That, however, is the question. Does the new translation accomplish this? It remains to be seen, and in the meantime Fr Bea's little book bears the character of an *apologia*; for though, as he tells us, many have welcomed the new Psalter with approval, some of its critics have been so vigorous in their attacks as to have aroused his wrath. He would have left a better impression on us had he not been in such a hurry to take shelter from attack under the plea that the Fathers undertook the work only at the request of the Pope. It might be answered that the same is true of the great St Jerome's work of biblical revision; but I do not notice that he is spared criticism on that account. Since there is here question of a translation that is ambitious to occupy the place filled by our present Latin Psalter for so many centuries in the life of the Church, perhaps the more criticism the better while there is still time. We do not want to be committed to another wrong path for a further eighteen hundred years. It is to be hoped, therefore, that all who are bound to the Office will study and try the new Psalter. All are not qualified to pass judgment on the difficult question of its correctness as a translation; but there are other important considerations, as for instance that of its literary form and harmony. The old Psalter may, and often does, fail to provide an intelligible meaning; but there is a music in its words which renders it easy and pleasant to recite. It was composed in the popular language at a time when Latin was still a living tongue and had not yet suffered all the corruptions of a later age.

Fr Bea describes in an interesting manner the problems that confronted his colleagues when they set about the task of providing a

revision of the Book of Psalms. Their first problem was to decide on what material they should work. There were many possibilities. First there was the Hebrew text of the Psalter, such as it is found today between two and three thousand years since the psalms were first composed by David and his fellow-singers. Only a Hebrew scholar could appreciate the enormous difficulties in the way of re-establishing the original text with anything approaching probability. Next there was the Greek version of the Psalter found in the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, made in Egypt for the use of Greek-speaking Jews two or three centuries before the Christian era; that is, made at a time when, as some maintain, there was much more likelihood of certainty about the original words and meaning of the Hebrew psalmists. This Greek version of the psalms was the one used by the infant Church. Thirdly, there were the three different Latin versions of the Psalter associated with the venerable name of St Jerome, called respectively the Roman, the Gallican and the Psalter according to the Hebrews.

Now when St Jerome began his revisionary work on the Bible about 380 there were already in use among the faithful a number of Latin translations of the psalms which differed one from another considerably, though substantially all the same and all based on the Greek version of the Septuagint. It was a time when the Book of Psalms was still the favourite prayer-book of the faithful that it had been among the first Christian converts from Judaism. These Latin translations of the Psalter had been in use for two or three centuries or more, since the time, in fact, that the spread of the faith among the Latin-speaking peoples of the West, particularly in North Africa had created the need for such translations of the Scriptures. The Saint complains that some of the translators were far from well-equipped for their task, and it was for this reason and the resultant confusion that Pope Damasus had commissioned him to prepare a revised text of the Latin Gospels. It may be assumed that a similar objection could be raised against the current versions of the Psalter. But we all know how attached we become by use to what is traditional and familiar, even if less perfect than it might be. No shoe fits like an old shoe. We may remember here the sort of letters that appeared in the Catholic Press from the pious faithful when Monsignor Knox's version of the English New Testament began to be read in the churches. Hence St Jerome, as he tells us himself, corrected the old Latin Gospels with a very light touch, leaving many imperfections as they stood for fear of unduly shocking the susceptibilities of the faithful. He had all the more reason for dealing in a similar fashion with the psalms which had so long been in common use for both private and liturgical prayer. Thus he made his first

revision of the Psalter, as he says, *cursim* and *magna ex parte* only. This revision came to be known as the Roman Psalter and is generally said to be that still found in the missal and used at the Vatican basilica.

Within a short time, however, St Jerome had to complain that things were worse than ever, for his own revision was so interspersed with bits from the unrevised versions that he frankly preferred the unrevised ones. He went to work again and produced a more thorough and scholarly version based on the Greek and the Hebrew, aided by the researches of his great predecessor Origen. In course of time this new revision gained popularity, especially in the West, and acquired the title of Gallican Psalter. It is the Psalter we now use, for it was introduced into the breviary by the Dominican Pius V. I have not been able to find his reason for this change, but in view of what we know of the formation of the Dominican liturgy and of the intense interest shown by the early schools of the Order in the correction of the biblical text, it is tempting to conclude that Pius V introduced into the breviary the Psalter which he had been accustomed to use in the Dominican Office. A few years later the Gallican Psalter was inserted into the revised Clementine Vulgate, and there it shares with the other sacred books the honour of having been declared by the Council of Trent the authentic version of the Church.

Still not content, St Jerome then produced a completely new Latin translation of the Psalter from the Hebrew text; his motive here is said to have been the desire of depriving his Jewish opponents of their objections against translations made from the Septuagint, which they condemned as faulty. This has never come into common use. And thus matters have remained until the present day, though during the past four centuries many private revisions and fresh Latin translations have been made, some for the sake of a more correct rendering of the original, others out of the desire for a version of the psalms which would be more pleasing to classical scholars. And if there has been no further official move on the part of ecclesiastical authority, it need not therefore be concluded that Rome has shown a lamentable lack of interest in a matter of so much importance for the faithful. No one can say that the Gallican Psalter we use is completely unintelligible or altogether wrong. It can well bear improvement, but those who are familiar with the difficult problem of textual criticism of the Bible may well question whether, until lately, the time had arrived when it would have been advisable to undertake a wholesale and definitive revision. An example will illustrate this point. Forty years ago Pius X appointed a commission of Benedictine scholars to undertake the work of restoring the original text of St Jerome's Vulgate, a task that might seem simple to most of us.

But the labour of examining and collating the ancient manuscripts proved so great that the work is by no means finished yet, and we are warned not to expect the text of the Psalter before 1952.

Under the persuasion that a mere revision of any of St Jerome's Psalters would be unsatisfactory for the object they had in view, which means in plain language that none of them was considered a reliable translation, Fr Bea and his colleagues took the hardy decision of trying to improve on his translation of the Hebrew text by making a completely new translation from the Hebrew, with the help of all the ancient versions in whatever language. The result of their labours is now at our service, and whether it ever attains the honour of replacing the Gallican Psalter or not, we may welcome it for the light it throws on our understanding of the psalms. It would be altogether unreasonable to expect that any translation of the psalms, be it never so good, should save us the trouble of thought and study. Here, as in other books of the Bible, one part of Scripture explains another. Therefore no one must expect to understand the psalms without due acquaintance with the rest of the Bible. If, for example, in the new Psalter Moab is no longer the enigmatical 'pot of my hope', it will still remain a mystery for the uninitiated that Moab continues to be 'my wash-pot' and that the psalmist 'will put (his) shoe upon Edom'. If we are no longer mystified by 'a curdled mountain, a fat mountain' in Psalm 67, we still get in its place 'the mountains of Bashan are very high mountains, the mountains of Bashan are steep mountains'; and some thought is required to find what Bashan has got to do with the case. So when we complain of our lack of understanding of the Psalms, perhaps it is not altogether St Jerome's fault. It may be that we ought to take to ourselves the implicit reproach contained in the words placed by Bellarmine at the head of his commentary on the Psalter: 'Here is the Book of Psalms, which all ecclesiastics read and so few understand'. A long time before Bellarmine, the sharp-tongued Abelard indicated what is perhaps one of the reasons: 'We wonder why all our study is about how to sing the Scripture and none about how to understand it; all about the way to pronounce the words and none about their meaning. Which is the more useful, that sheep should bleat or that sheep should eat?' (*Epist. viii*).

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