

The Psalms of David in Metre, also known as the Scottish Psalter of 1650, is an English-language Psalm book, bequeathed to the Church by the poetic, scholarly, and devotional labors of the 17th century Puritans of England and Scotland. This Psalter is a *metrical* Psalter, in that the Psalms of the Bible are set to meter and rhyme for greater ease in singing. Such Psalters first appeared during the Protestant Reformation, when many churches recovered the proper place of the Scriptures in the life of the Church, and the gospel which the Scriptures set forth. Such Psalters played a vital role in restoring the Songs of Christ and the Early Church to the lips, hearts, and lives of God’s people. In the first several decades of the Reformation, partial or complete metrical Psalters were versified in Dutch, English, French, and German.

During the 1640s, the Westminster Assembly (so-called because they met at Westminster Abbey in London) produced many documents of lasting importance for the Church, including the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. The Assembly also produced a Form of Church Government and a Directory for Worship. All of these documents were framed with the intention for them to be received and adopted by all of the churches and nations in Britain; but ultimately, they were only adopted by the Church of Scotland.

When the singing of Psalms was discussed at the Assembly, it was agreed that there should also be a new Psalter for British churches. The Psalters then in use were quite similar: the Psalters used in English churches (first published in 1562) and in Scottish churches (first published in 1564) were revised from different editions of the same Psalter. These Psalters were known to have some problems in accuracy. Two men, William Barton and Francis Rouse (or Rous), had made two different metrical Psalters, which were submitted to the Westminster Assembly. The Assembly chose Rouse’s Psalter for its greater accuracy, and began the work of revising it, to bring it into greater conformity to the original Hebrew.

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland had dispatched several commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, in order to assist in the proceedings. When these men returned to Scotland with the revised Psalter in 1647, the General Assembly undertook an even more extensive revision, which lasted two years. On November 23, 1649, a commission of the General

Assembly authorized the finished Psalter to be the only Psalter sung in congregations after May 1, 1650. Since then, the Scottish Psalter has come to be sung by millions around the world for over three hundred and sixty years.

This brief sketch may help to illustrate the history and origins of the Scottish Psalter of 1650. But the question will be asked, Why should we sing this Psalter today? What value does the Scottish Psalter have for us in the 21st century—especially for members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church?

The Scottish Psalter is Accurate

The Scottish Psalter went through extensive revision by the Westminster Assembly, and by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, so that it would be as accurate to the Hebrew original as possible. Some of the most gifted and skilled Hebrew scholars in all of England and Scotland were members of those assemblies, and were involved in the revision process. The result is a Psalter that has been known for centuries for its faithfulness to the Hebrew text of the Psalms—“more plain, smooth, and agreeable to the text than any heretofore,” as described on the original title page of the Scottish Psalter.

In 1673, an edition of the Scottish Psalter was printed in London, which included a preface addressing Psalm-singing in general, as well as the Scottish Psalter in particular. This preface, which was signed by over two dozen Puritan ministers (including Thomas Manton, John Owen, Thomas Watson, and Matthew Poole), described this Psalter in the following words: “The translation which is now put into thy hands cometh nearest to the original of any that we have seen.” About one hundred years later, William Marshall, in a sermon preached to the Associate Presbytery of Pennsylvania, gave the same sentiment: “We shall not say that it is the most elegant in respect of the style, yet it is acknowledged to excel in what is far more momentous, [that is,] in expressing the mind of the Spirit.”

“It proceeds on the principle of giving every thought in the original, and nothing more; and in this it has succeeded to an extent which is marvellous, and which can be realized only by one who has tested it through careful comparison.” —*John Ker*

Robert Murray M’Cheyne, when fashioning the Bible reading plan that many still use today, also gave directions for singing from the Scottish Psalter. In doing

so, this accomplished Hebrew scholar gave the following commendation: “The metrical version of the Psalms should be read or sung through at least once in the year. It is truly an admirable translation from the Hebrew, and is frequently more correct than the prose version [that is, the Authorized or King James Version].” John Ker summed it up well when he said, “It proceeds on the principle of giving every thought in the original, and nothing more; and in this it has succeeded to an extent which is marvellous, and which can be realized only by one who has tested it through careful comparison.”

We will not say that the Scottish Psalter is perfectly translated in every place, any more than any translation of the Bible is perfect. But in consideration of the labors for its accuracy bestowed upon it, and the commendations given to its accuracy by many of those most capable in Hebrew, we may have confidence that as we sing from this Psalter, we are singing from a Psalter which is truly faithful and accurate to “the words of David, and of Asaph the seer” (2 Chron. 29:30).

The Scottish Psalter is Simple

When we speak of the simplicity of the Scottish Psalter, we do not mean that every word or phrase found in the Psalter is always “easy.” Some words and word forms over the centuries have become less used, or have changed their meanings. Nor do we mean that the Psalms themselves are always simple, as though they are always easy to interpret. There may certainly be “some things hard to be understood” (2 Pet. 3:16) in the Book of Psalms, as in the rest of Scripture.

If someone knows only one or two tunes of the right meter, they can sing any Psalm using this Psalter. The emphasis is (rightly) placed on the words of the Psalm, rather than the tune that happens to be used.

The Scottish Psalter is simple in that it is easy to use. Every Psalm in the Psalter has been put to common meter, with thirteen Psalms put to alternate meters as well. Common meter features four lines per stanza, with eight syllables in the first and third lines, and six in the second and fourth lines. This is a very simple meter, with a wide selection of tunes available to be used. Earlier Psalters featured a wide variety of meters, and frequently had particular tunes matched to each Psalm or Psalm selection. Those that produced the Scottish Psalter (particularly the English) perceived that musical and metrical complexity, while sometimes interesting, is not always beneficial to having ALL of God’s people sing His songs, whether or not they are especially talented in music.

There are many hundreds, if not thousands, of tunes capable to be sung to the selections found in the Scottish Psalter. But if someone knows only one or two tunes of the right meter (such as “New Britain,” the tune used for the hymn “Amazing Grace”), they can sing any Psalm using this Psalter.

Some look at this feature as a mark against the Scottish Psalter, disappointed that there are not tunes assigned to different selections. It is suggested that this may make memorization more difficult. But one can also look at this as a positive feature. The tunes that one may use are irrelevant, meaning that the emphasis is (rightly) placed on the words of the Psalm, rather than the tune that happens to be used. Pastors that use this Psalter may have confidence in choosing a Psalm based upon their sermon text or message, without needing to see if the tune is familiar to the congregation.

Although many congregations continue to use this Psalter today, it is especially helpful for individual and family worship, when one may not have a precentor to lead in singing, or to introduce unfamiliar tunes. As we sing from this Psalter, we may have confidence in the Word of God that we sing, in every verse of every Psalm—even if we have little confidence in our own abilities to sing!

The Scottish Psalter has A Historic Place in the Reformed Presbyterian Church

The Reformed Presbyterian Church traces its origins to the Church of Scotland which first authorized the Scottish Psalter in 1649. In the latter part of the 1600s, when the faithful members of the Church of Scotland (the Covenanters) were suffering hardship and death “for Christ’s crown and covenant,” this Psalter was their constant friend and companion. Covenanters frequently went to their deaths with a portion of this Psalter on their lips—Donald Cargill singing Psalm 118; Archibald Stewart singing Psalm 2; Margaret Wilson singing the short meter version of Psalm 25; James Renwick singing Psalm 103; and many, many more.

After the time of persecution ended, and many Covenanters came to be known as Reformed Presbyterians, they continued to use the Scottish Psalter. When they came from Scotland and Ireland to America and Canada and Australia, this was the Psalter they brought with them. No Reformed Presbyterian Church allowed for any other Psalter version to be used until 1889. Even after that time, the Scottish Psalter was not entirely set aside. For example, the Reformed Presbyterian congregation in Almonte, Ontario, continued to use the Scottish Psalter until 1975; and it is still well-known to Reformed Presbyterians in Scotland, Ireland, and Australia, even if few congregations continue to use it in public worship.

Reformed Presbyterians have frequently commended the use of this Psalter. Robert J. Dodds, an American missionary to Syria from 1856 to 1870, wrote regarding “what an excellent metrical version of the Psalms we have. Its excellence consists,” he said, in its “fidelity to the original Hebrew. It may be asserted without fear of successful contradiction, that, take it all in all, it retains the meaning, spirit, life, energy, majesty and sublimity of the Hebrew Psalms, as little impaired as does the prose translation.”

“Has the Scottish Metrical Version had great influence on the lives and characters of men? ... It has been used thousands of times to lead men to seek spiritual life, to enter into spiritual life, and to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Lord. What better influence could it have than that?” —*J. Renwick Wright*

More recently, the late J. Renwick Wright, in an address on “The Influence of the Scottish Metrical Psalter” (1949), tied in the experiential Christianity so often found in connection with this Psalter with its precision in translation. “Has the Scottish Metrical Version had great influence on the lives and characters of men? Yes, and all for good. Lying close, as it does, to its Hebrew original, it has been used thousands of times to lead men to seek spiritual life, to enter into spiritual life, and to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Lord. What better influence could it have than that?”

As we sing from this Psalter, let us remember those that have gone before us in the faith, who have been strengthened, comforted, and edified as they sang these very words. And let us give all the praise of any blessing we receive from this Psalter version to the same eternal and unchangeable God worshipped in centuries past by Reformed Presbyterians around the world.

The Scottish Psalter is Used Today throughout the World

The Scottish Psalter was approved by the Church of Scotland in the year 1649. That year predates every division that has ever occurred in Scottish Presbyterianism. Because of this, every denomination that traces its origins to the Church of Scotland can point to a time when it has used the Scottish Psalter exclusively. Most attempts at revising the Scottish Psalter have been performed by individual denominations from the late 1800s onwards, and have rarely had a significant influence beyond their denominational lines.

To this day, some Presbyterian denominations still exclusively use the Scottish Psalter in their worship. It is presently sung by individuals, families, and congregations

on every continent except Antarctica. Even some Reformed Baptist and Dutch Reformed congregations use this Psalter. The excellency of this version has caused it to be an international, trans-denominational Psalter—just as God intended the Psalter to be in the first place. The Book of Psalms is the praise-book for all of God’s people who love His Word, in which the Psalms are found. The Psalms are not the peculiar treasure of Reformed Presbyterians; they ought to be treasured by all true Christians.

The Scottish Psalter was originally intended to be a part of the uniform worship of English-speaking churches. This intention is realized when Christians of various denominations and various nationalities unite in singing God’s praises with this Psalter. May this be our own aim and goal, as we “pray and labor for the visible oneness of the Church of God in our own land and throughout the world, on the basis of truth and Scriptural order” (RPCNA *Covenant of 1871*). When we praise the God who transcends our divisions, with His songbook that transcends our divisions, in this version that transcends our divisions, we fulfill the command that we “with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6).

—Written by Sean McDonald and Brad Johnston

For more information on the Scottish Psalter, including vendors of Psalters and recordings, historical resources, and more, visit:

<http://1650psalter.com/>

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An Introduction to The Scottish Psalter of 1650

SECOND EDITION

All lands to God in joyful sounds,
aloft your voices raise.
Sing forth the honour of his name,
and glorious make his praise.

—*Psalms 66:1, 2*