

**A MATTER OF DIVINE NECESSITY:
The History, Use, and Meaning of the Psalter in
Early Puritan New England**

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Introduction

As William L. Holladay writes in the opening to his comprehensive volume, The Psalms through Three Thousand Years, "...the Psalms have been a primary vehicle for worship. For two millennia this collection of 150 individual psalms has helped to shape the public and private worship of Jews and Christians; I am not aware of any other body of religious poetry that has been so influential for so long a period of time, and for such a variety of religious communities." (1) This paper will explore the historical, sociological, and theological significance of the Psalms in one of these communities, that of the Puritans in New England. It will take as its point of departure the emergence of distinctly Puritan psalters within the context of the development of metrical psalmody during the broader Protestant Reformation. The chronological parameters for the study, then, will generally keep to the period of time beginning with the publication of the Sternhold-Hopkins psalter in 1562 and ending at the turn of the seventeenth century, at the point at which the hymnody of Isaac Watts was eclipsing metrical psalmody as the dominant mode of singing in Puritan worship in America.

It should be noted that in the history and evolution of the psalter there has existed a tension between what is considered good music and poetry (artistic integrity) and what qualifies as accuracy in translation (linguistic integrity). This tension is certainly present in any discussion of the Puritan psalters, and as one psalter is retired in favor of another, it is indicative of the changing emphases and needs of the worshipping community for which the psalter was composed and compiled. It is also reflective of the intellectual background

of the translator. With this concern for qualification in mind, it would be helpful at this juncture to assert my own illiteracy in regard to music. Therefore, my comments pertaining to the history, use, and meaning of the psalter will proceed from textual, sociological, and theological perspectives. This should by no means dismiss the validity of the study of these psalters as works of music; indeed, this examination, though a distinct endeavor from this paper, would only serve to enhance its findings. It is my hope that this study will appear a solid work in spite of this limitation.

The History of the Psalter in Early Puritan New England

Any discussion of the history of the psalter in Puritan New England would have to take into account the wider development of metrical psalmody within the Protestant Reformation movement. While Martin Luther “adapted psalms for congregational singing,” he did the same for non-biblical songs and hymns, such as those originally composed in Latin. (Holladay, 198) However, it was Calvin and the movement inspired by him in Switzerland which had the most lasting impact on the emergence of metrical psalmody. Influenced by Zwingli and other Swiss reformers, Calvin took an interest in “the singing of psalms as a way to arouse one’s ardor for God.” (198) Calvin writes in his third chapter of the Institutes:

Furthermore it is a thing most expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers by which one prays to God or sings His praises so that the hearts of all may be aroused and stimulated to make similar prayers and to render similar praises and thanks to God with a common love.
(Holladay, 199)

Truly, it was Calvin's belief that only biblical prayers be sung by the congregation that led in great part to his recommendation regarding psalm-singing in worship. This concern with biblical centrality and mandate will be discussed later in specific regard to the early Puritans. Suffice it to say, Calvin's promotion of metrical psalmody, culminating in the publication of the Genevan Psalter in French in 1562, exerted significant influence on the early Puritans. (Davies, 121)

Despite the growing continental regard for metrical psalmody, there was still considerable suspicion leveled against this aspect of worship in England. Though "[t]he strong Puritan elements that developed in the English Reformation were much enamoured with Calvin's work in Geneva," metrical psalmody never completely gained endorsement through inclusion in early prayer books or hymnals. (Shepherd, 51) In her Injunctions of 1559, Queen Elizabeth I did allow limited, though unofficial, use of hymnody, including metrical psalmody, in public worship:

And that there be a modest and distinct song so used in all parts of the common prayers in the church, that the same may be as plainly understood, as if it were read without singing; and yet nevertheless for the comforting of such that delight in music it may be permitted, that in the beginning, or in the end of common prayers, either at morning or evening, there may be sung a hymn, or suchlike song to the praise of Almighty God, in the best sort of melody and music that may be conveniently devised, having respect that the sentence of the hymn may be understood and perceived.
(Shepherd, 52)

This statement betrays an awareness of the existence of and growing popular interest in congregational singing in general and in metrical psalmody in particular. Indeed, there

were already metrical psalters published in English. In approximately 1535, biblical translator Miles Coverdale had published a collection of metrical versions of thirteen psalms, entitled, Ghostly psalms and spiritual songs drawn out of the holy Scripture, for the comfort and consolation of such as love to rejoice in God and his word. Though Coverdale's prose translation of the psalter adapted for inclusion in the Great Bible of 1539 by Cranmer, his "Goostly Psalmes...was prohibited soon after its appearance, as Henry VIII, having rejected alliance with the Lutheran princes of Germany (and his marriage with Anne of Cleves), veered again toward Catholicism." (Haraszti, 4)

Perhaps more important for the study of American Puritanism is the version of the psalter varyingly referred to as the "Sternhold-Hopkins Version," the "Old Version," and the "Day Psalter." This version, which is in metric scheme composed in common or ballad meter (alternating lines of eight and six syllables), was originally authored by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins. The background of these composers is somewhat nebulous, although Alice Morse Earle in her book, The Sabbath in Puritan New England, grants some illumination on the identities of Sternhold and Hopkins:

Very little is known of the authors of this version. Sternhold was educated at Oxford; was Groom of the Robes to Henry VIII. and Edward VI., was a "bold and busy Calvinist," and died in 1549. The little of interest told of John Hopkins is that he was a minister and schoolmaster, and that he assisted the work of Sternhold.

(173)

Further account is given that Thomas Sternhold also wrote before his death in 1549, "Certain Chapters of the Proverbs of Solomon drawn into Metre." (Glass, 65)

It is known that this psalter was developed through five editions, spanning the years 1548-1562, and as Thomas Sternhold died in 1549, it necessitated additional psalms be written by several other authors; among these are Norton, Whittingham, a Puritan who was married to John Calvin's sister, and Keethe. (Earle, 175) Thomas Fuller characterized these authors, as "men whose piety was better than their poetry, and they had drunk more of Jordan than of Helicon." (176) One distinction that this version of the psalter can claim is its eventual inclusion in the Book of Common Prayer in 1562, in the edition printed by John Day of London in 1562, which went by the official title, The whole Booke of Psalms. (Earle, 173; Foote, 4) This was the version embraced and transported to America by the Massachusetts Bay Puritans. (Atkins, 3) As Henry Alexander Glass writes, "The Sternhold version had the merit of being simple and popular." (65) Earle grants to the Sternhold-Hopkins version the highest praise, stating that, "Sternhold's verses compare quite favorably, when looked at either as a whole or with regard to individual lines, with those of other poets of his day, for Chaucer was the only great poet who preceded him." (186)

Despite these lauds of gratitude for the simplicity of the Sternhold-Hopkins' verses, there was also significant criticism brought to bear on its style and language almost from its inception. Its rendition of Psalm 74:12 has often been cited as examples of "John Hopkins[' expostulation] with the Deity in...ludicrous, at least trivial expressions":

“Why doost withdraw thy hand aback,
 And hide it in thy lappe?
 O plucke it out and be not slack
 To give thy foes a rappe!”
 (Macdougall, 9)

Earle seeks to curb this particular criticism by pointing out that such verse must be read contextually, and that terms such as “rappe” in all likelihood meant a heavier blow than might be inferred from a contemporary understanding of the word. (184) Lord Rochester asserted his own criticism of the Sternhold-Hopkins version:

Sternhold and Hopkins had great qualms
 When they translated David’s Psalms,
 To make the heart right glad: But had it been King David’s fate
 To hear thee sing and them translate
 By ---, t’would set him mad.
 (Davies, 125)

Again, Earle defends the psalter on this charge, as well: “I see no signs of qualmishness; they show to me rather a healthy sturdiness as one of their strongest characteristics.”

(177) At any rate, the Sternhold-Hopkins psalter was sturdy enough to endure several transformations and additions (not to mention *editions*) and be transported to the New World, where it enjoyed a healthy and reasonably long life of usage until it was superseded by the Tate and Brady psalter in 1696.

The next incarnation of the psalter to impact the life and worship of the early Puritans appeared in the form of the psalter of Henry Ainsworth in 1612. Earle describes Ainsworth as “the greatest of all the Holland Separatists.” (129) Indeed, he had dissociated himself from his ecclesiastical origins, becoming a Separatist, or “Brownist,” in

exile in Amsterdam in 1593. A renowned Hebrew scholar, Ainsworth sought to correct many of the errors in translation in the Sternhold-Hopkins psalter. (Haraszti, 6) This psalter, which went by the title, Book of Psalmes: Englished both in prose and metre, “represented great scholarship on the part of Ainsworth, a genuine interest in the music and a somewhat lesser poetic ability.” (Atkins, 4) Indeed, thirty-nine different tunes were included, many of them (according to Professor Waldo S. Pratt, eighteen) derived from contemporary French psalters. (Macdougall, 15) The purpose of the psalter, and its basis for authority, is presented in its frontispiece, which contains the words of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 5:18-19: “Be ye filled with the Spirit: speaking to your selves in Psalms, and Hymns, and spiritual Songs, singing and making melodie in your hart to the Lord.” (Davies, 117) The Ainsworth psalter was used for just such a purpose of worship for many years in the Puritan meeting-houses in New England. There are records demonstrating the usage of this psalter until 1692 in both Plymouth and Salem. (Earle, 138-139) Perhaps the most lasting literary legacy of the Ainsworth psalter, however, is preserved in the words of Longfellow’s “Courtship of Miles Standish,” in which Priscilla Mullens is seen awaiting John Alden’s arrival, as

Open wide on her lap lay the well-worn psalm-book of Ainsworth,
 Printed in Amsterdam, the words and the music together,
 Rough-hewn, angular notes, like stones in the wall of a church-yard,
 Darkened and overhung by the running vine of the verses.
 (Atkins, 3)

The Ainsworth psalter held a beloved place in the hearts of the residents of Plymouth, as is evidenced by the church’s refusal to replace Ainsworth with Massachusetts’ own

version of the psalter until 1692, even though the latter had been printed in 1640. Perhaps the most memorable verses in the psalter are found in the twenty-third psalm, for Earle, “the most poetical lines I can discover...which are beautiful for the reason that the noble thoughts of the Psalmist cannot be hidden, even by the wording of the learned Puritan minister”:

Jehovah feedeth me: I shall not lack
 In grassy fields, he downe dooth make me lye:
 he gently-leads mee, quiet-Waters by.
 He dooth return my soul: for his name-sake
 in paths of justice leads-me-quietly.
 Yea, though I walk in dale of deadly-shade
 ile fear none yll, for with me thou wilt be
 thy rod, thy staff eke, they shall comfort mee.
 (Earle, 138)

However, the Ainsworth psalter, though appreciated because of its uniquely Puritan authorship, was not without its critics. For one thing, its idiosyncratic employment of hyphenated, compound words and phrases defied English grammatical sensibilities: “highly-him-preferre,” “renowned-name,” “repose-me-quietlie,” “in-mind-up-lay,” “turn-to-ashes,” “my-alonely-soul,” “beat-them-final,” “pouring-out-them-hard,” “inveyers-make-streight,” “condemn-thou-them-as-guilty.” (Earle, 128) In addition, “[n]o doubt the ten-syllabled lines common in the French psalter gave rise to the complaint that the Ainsworth melodies were difficult to sing.” (Macdougall, 16) So, with these concerns in mind, the stage was set for the emergence of a new, distinctly American psalter.

It would be incorrect, as Zoltan Haraszti indicates, to attribute the development of a

new psalter by the Massachusetts Bay Colony to musical difficulties with the Ainsworth psalter. (8) Nor was it entirely displeasure with translation that prompted its composition, though Cotton Mather does write in his 1702 Magnalia Christi Americana words to this affect in regard to the origins of The Bay Psalm Book:

Tho' they blessed God for the Religious Endeavors of them who translated the Psalms into the Meetre usually Annex'd at the End of the Bible, yet they beheld in the Translation so many Detractions from, Additions to, and Variations of, not only the Text, but the very Sense of the Psalmist, that it was an Offense to them.

(Foote, 5)

In fact, it was the high quality of the Plymouth Colony's psalm-book which spurred the Bay Colony to produce its own. Thus, in 1640, the book bearing the title The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre was published. Its favorable reception was nearly immediate. With the known exceptions of Ipswich (which retained the Sternhold and Hopkins psalter until 1667), and Salem and Plymouth (which continued to use Ainsworth's psalter), "it is probable that every other church in New England soon accepted the new book, of which they had good reason to be proud." (7) After all, this was the first book to be printed in New England, and in all likelihood, in North America.

There is an extended introduction to the psalter, in which a number of questions and concerns are enumerated and explored; the authors are meticulously careful in qualifying their work. The questions asked at the outset and explicated in the following introduction are illuminating:

First, what psalmes are to be sung in churches? whether Davids and other scripture psalmes, or the psalmes invented by the gifts of godly men in every age of the church. Secondly, if scripture psalmes, whether in their owne words, or in such meter as english poetry is wont to run in? Thirdly, by whom are they to be sung? whether by the whole churches together with their voices? or by one man singing alone and the rest joyning in silence, & in the close saying amen.
(The Bay Psalm Book, 1)

Ultimately, it is the concluding lines of the preface which provide the most clear rationale for the composition of this new psalter:

that soe wee may sing in Sion [New England] the Lord's
songs of prayse according to his owne
will; untill hee take us from hence,
and wipe away all our teares, &
bid us enter into our master's
joye to sing eternall
Halleluiahs.
(13)

It is crucial that the creation of this new psalter be grounded firmly in scripture, and keep faithfully to the spirit of scripture as well as the letter. Not only does this preface offer insight into the intention of the authors, but it also sheds some light on the identities of these writers. Cotton Mather, in his Magnalia written sixty years after the composition of The Bay Psalm Book, records the following poem prepared by a Mr. Shepard of Cambridge:

You Roxbury Poets, keep clear of the Crime
Of missing to give us a very good Rhime;
And you of Dorchester, your verses lengthen,
But with the Text's own words, you will them strengthen.
(Foote, 5)

These addresses to the various poets contained in “Shepard’s humorous little stanza” seem to point to Rev. Richard Mather of Dorchester and Rev. Thomas Welde and Rev. John Eliot of Roxbury. (Haraszti, 12) However, as Zoltan Haraszti contends, Mather did not intend to attribute authorship solely to Welds, Eliot, and Mather, but to a host of other divines among whom these three were included. (12) This opens up the possibilities for authorship of the preface, as well. A draft of the preface, without any of the psalms, has been sustained in the Boston Public Library as part of the Prince Collection. (17) Though the manuscript is unsigned, an 1870 description of it included in the Catalogue of the Prince Library assigns probable authorship to Richard Mather. (18) Haraszti challenges this proposal, however, on the grounds that the manuscript does not contain “the blunt force of Mather’s writing.” (20) In fact, Haraszti concludes, “the tone was rather the slow persuasiveness of John Cotton...who...seldom raised his voice.” (20) Haraszti goes on to argue that the method of argumentation used in the preface is more in line with the scholastic style of Cotton, and that while Cotton referred in his writings often to Moses and the Prophets, Mather selected contemporaries from which to quote. (20) All in all, Haraszti makes a convincing argument for diverse authorship of The Bay Psalm Book in general, and for John Cotton’s composition of the preface in particular.

The wide appeal and popularity of this monumental accomplishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony has been cited. Indeed, copies of the Bay psalter were even in use in England and Scotland. However, as with the other metrical psalters already discussed, The Bay Psalm Book did not escape critique. Even the preface of the psalter

acknowledges and provides a defense for an anticipated impression of the psalter's rough phraseology:

If therefore the verses are not alwayes so smooth and elegant as some may desire or expect; let them consider that Gods Altar needs not our pollishings: Ex. 20. for we have respected rather a plaine translation, than to smooth our verses with the sweetness of any paraphrase, and soe have attended Conscience rather than Elegance, fidelity rather than poetry, in translating the hebrew words into english language, and Davids poetry into english metre.

(The Bay Psalm Book, 12)

Complete with biblical reference, the psalter braces for attack of its "literary deficiencies."

(Foote, 7) One unidentified critic waxed satirical in an assessment of the psalter:

Welde, Eliot and Mather mounted the restive steed Pegasus, Hebrew Psalter in hand, and trotted in hot haste on the rough road of Shemitic roots and metrical psalmody. Other divines rode behind, and after cutting and slashing, mending and patching, twisting and turning, finally produced what must ever remain the most unique specimen of poetical tinkering in our literature.

(10)

Though this arrogant appraisal of The Bay Psalm Book is in large part unfounded and inaccurate, there were "many awkward turns and inversions" that caused some verses to "limp...painfully." (8) One can identify these unnatural word choices through an analysis, again, of the twenty-third psalm:

The Lord to mee a shepheard is,
want therefore shall not I.
Hee in the folds of tender-grasse,
doth cause me down to lie:

Eventually, the psalter would be edited, as early as 1651, and became renamed The New England Psalter. (11) Cotton Mather describes the evolution of the psalter:

It was thought that a little more of Art was to be employed upon them: And for that Cause, they were committed unto Mr. Dunster, who Revised and Refined this Translation; and (with some Assistance from Mr. Richard Lyon...) he brought it into the Condition wherein our Churches ever since have used it.

(10)

As with the Sternhold and Hopkins psalter in England, The Bay Psalm Book was finally replaced almost universally by Tate and Brady's New Version in 1696. Also, the advent of Isaac Watts' hymnody did much to supplant metrical psalmody in Puritan New England.

Throughout the history of metrical psalmody's impact on Puritan New England, there exists that conflict in desire between faithful text and melodious verse. As more of the clergy became educated and knowledgeable in Hebrew, all the greater was the scrutiny of textual accuracy. However, as the writers and translators of the psalms became more concerned with authenticity, the more exposed they became to popular critiques of style and word choice. Truly, this was the paradox of metrical psalmody, the perpetual imbalance of good poetry and biblical integrity.

The Use of the Psalter in Early Puritan New England

Once the authors were finished with the psalter, it was up to the community for which it had been composed to put it into practice. Metrical psalms, after all, were intended to be sung. Of primary importance was the singing of psalms in the worshipping

congregation. How metrical psalmody was transformed in the churches from printed word to harmonious proclamation was not always a simple process. As Horton Davies comments, “Between the theory and the practice of metrical psalmody, between the idea of an act of adoration of God and the cacophonous doggerel of reality, there was a great gulf fixed.” (125) The practice of metrical psalmody in Puritan New England was realized chiefly in the form of “lining-out.” The Westminster Assembly in 1664 had issued a statement in regard to this method in its Directory:

that the whole congregation may join herein, every one that can read is to have a Psalm book; and all others not disabled by age or otherwise, are to be exhorted to learn to read. But for the present, it is convenient that the minister or some other fit person appointed by him and other ruling officers do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.

Westminster’s statement on literacy was indeed admirable. However, the implementation of the procedure of “lining-out” the verses of the psalms was for the most part problematic, and in all likelihood fostered the negative sentiments toward metrical psalmody which paved the way for its replacement by hymnody in the early eighteenth century. Davies points to two significant areas of difficulty with this method of congregational singing. First of all, the “lining-out” by the precentor, or parish clerk, served to interrupt the flow of worship, which “dampened the spirits that might have been raised by continuous singing.” (126) Secondly, when the precentor failed to keep to the proper tune, altering between two or more within a given psalm, “[t]he result was a dreadful dissonance” in the congregation. (126) It is recorded in many places the

disastrous consequences of the failure to “line-out” correctly. Indeed, a complaint against “lining-out” is preserved by Puritan hymn-writer Isaac Watts in his preface to an early volume of hymns published by Benjamin Franklin in 1741. (Earle, 214) Despite the complications engendered by this method, however, it must be acknowledged that it fulfilled the purpose of acquainting congregations with the rich theological contents of the psalter, and assisted in promoting later developments in psalmody and hymnody.

The psalter was not only employed in regular congregational singing, but also held a significant role in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. As “[t]he rituals of Baptism and Communion as they were performed in New England churches reminded participants and witnesses of the redemptive drama that framed their spiritual existence,” it is no wonder that the psalms had such an important function in these rites. (Hambrick-Stowe, 124)

In two early accounts of Puritan eucharistic practice, the psalms are witnessed as having a place at the conclusion of the service. According to Anglican Thomas Lechford, the sacrament is observed monthly, and following the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup, “a Psalme is sung, and with a short blessing the congregation is dismissed.” (Davies, 164) A second record of early Puritan celebration of the Lord’s Supper is found in the writing of John Cotton. In his account, the theme of thanksgiving, so central to the Lord’s Supper, has an important role, and it is in service to this theme that the psalm is employed:

After the celebration of the Supper, a Psalme of thanksgiving is sung, (according to Mat. 36.30.) and the Church is dismissed with a blessing. (165)

The singing of the psalm was a key component to the service of the Lord's Supper. It seems clear that this central role of the psalm in eucharistic worship, so vital to the early Puritans, has been lost in most of the churches. It would be well-remembered that Christian eucharistic practice has its forerunner in the *todah*, or thanksgiving psalm, of biblical Israel.

In addition to the psalter's use in public worship, it also had a significant impact on private devotional practice for the early Puritans. In family devotion, psalm singing played a key part. As the practice of daily prayer emphasized the rhythm, or cyclical nature, of life, the recitation or singing of psalms brought this function into focus. Psalm 22, with its childbirth imagery upholding God's life-sustaining power, is suggested for inclusion in morning prayer; others include 3, 5, 16, and 144. (Hambrick-Stowe, 146) Recommended for evening prayer, because of its emphasis on the theme of death, is Psalm 141. (149) Aside from family devotion, it was encouraged that the individual would partake in private spiritual exercises. One such exercise was meditation, which involved a good degree of self-examination. The model for this reflection is to be found in Psalm 139, and undoubtedly this psalm was repeatedly referenced in the course of self-examination. (168)

There can be no question that "[m]etrical psalms...were created for all of the congregation to sing--men, women and children." (Collins, 2) As Hambrick-Stowe points out, "Congregational singing was popular singing." (114) It was an exercise in unity: among neighbors, among ages, and even among sexes. Earle notes that, "I can well imagine what a pious delight this book [the Ainsworth psalter] was to our Pilgrim

Fathers; and what a still greater delight it was to our Pilgrim Mothers, in that day and country of few books.” (127) In public worship, as well, women were granted greater freedom in expression because of metrical psalmody. They were exempted from the mandate of silence, and John Cotton cited such examples as Miriam in Exodus 15:20-21 as biblical precedents as justification. (Hambrick-Stowe, 114)

The use of psalters both in public and private worship demonstrates the Puritans’ regard for tradition as well as a desire to revolutionize spiritual practice. Congregational usage of the psalter meant deeper and more personal interaction with scripture, and it introduced musical elements into corporate worship that had previously been ambiguously regarded. Referring to The Bay Psalm Book, Hambrick-Stowe concludes that, “The self-understanding and spiritual lives of few New Englanders would have remained unaffected by the constant use of this worship book.” (114) As Dietrich Bonhoeffer states in his text on the Psalms, The Prayer Book of the Bible, “Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power.” (26) Truly, it was a similar understanding that led to the advent of metrical psalmody and its use in the early Puritan churches.

The Meaning of the Psalter in Early Puritan New England

Consideration of the meaning of the psalter in early Puritan New England must account for the understood restriction to metrical psalmody in worship. The label of “cultural philistinism” has often been applied to the early Puritans on this point, though it is essentially a widely-accepted generalization and exaggeration. (Davies, 116) A host of

Puritans were authors of poetry (Spenser, Sidney, Milton, Marvell, Bradstreet, Wigglesworth, Taylor), and a love of music was shared by many, as well (Cromwell, Milton, Lawes, Bunyan). (116) The true concern of the Puritans for the inclusion of psalmody in worship is the matter of its congruence with the mandates and allowances of scripture.

It is appropriate to turn to the biblical texts used in the frontispieces of the Ainsworth psalter and The Bay Psalm Book as indicative of the biblical precedents from which the necessity of metrical psalmody was argued. As has been previously noted, the Ainsworth text includes Ephesians 5:18-19, which begins with the phrase, “Be ye filled with the Spirit.” Therefore, it was important that the singing of psalms be an endeavor of the spirit in the Spirit. What this precisely meant was explicated by later Independent New England ministers, namely, Peter Thacher, and John and Samuel Danforth:

Singing in the Spirit imports and implies the acting and exercise of Grace in Singing of the Psalms, the fervency of it; the up-flowings of it towards Heaven in the Devotions of superlative Love to God and Delight in God, and Praises of God, and the Lord Jesus Christ; and joy in the Holy Ghost.
(Davies, 119)

Thus, for psalmody to be effective in the worshipping community, it had to be sung “in the Spirit.”

Sincerity of heart was important in the singing of psalms, as is clearly indicated by the reference in Ainsworth to Ephesians 5:18-19. This theme also appears in the frontispiece of The Bay Psalm Book, where Colossians 3:16 is quoted: “Let the Word of God dwell

plenteously in you, in all wisdom, teaching and exhorting one another in Psalmes, Himnes, and spirituall Songs, singing to the Lord with grace in your hearts.” Here, sincerity of heart is connected to a statement regarding community obligation, that the psalms are to be employed in the building of Christian community.

Finally, the second text found in the Bay psalter’s frontispiece is James 5:13, which advises, “If any be afflicted, let him pray, and if any be merry let him sing psalmes.” This appeal to the use of psalms in the expression of joy seems incongruent with portrayals of stoic Puritanism. However, because of the mandate of scripture, this usage was not only permitted, but encouraged. John Cotton writes in his book, Singing of Psalmes a Gospel Ordinance:

Singing with Instruments was typically, and so a ceremonial Worship, and therefore is ceased. But singing with heart and voyce is morall worship, such as is written in the heart of all men by nature; as to pray in distresse, so when we are merry and have cause of solemne thanksgiving unto God, then to sing Psalmes, which the Holy Ghost by the Apostle James approveth and sanctifieth. James 5:13.
(118)

Thus, of utmost concern in the singing of psalms for the early Puritans were the ordination of scripture (in particular, borne by the apostolic witness), the presence of the Spirit, and the singer’s sincerity of heart. These, in the judgment of the early Puritans, made metrical psalmody the form par excellence of singing in worship. This led to the apparent restriction which limited music in worship to metrical psalmody.

But there was also eschatological significance to the psalter for the early Puritans.

As Hambrick-Stowe explains, “All Puritan devotion was ultimately preparation for glory,” and this could be extended to the psalms, as well. (115) There was a strong belief that the future Zion could be witnessed through the singing of psalms in the present Zion (i.e. New England). This “ideal of singing the songs of Zion in preparation for the celestial Zion” continued into the eighteenth century. (Davies, 128)

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has suggested a typology for the psalms in the last decade that would alter the form-critical modes usually employed to classify the poems. His methodology sets up three categories of psalms: psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of re-orientation. Because much of biblical Israel’s identity was shaped by the experience of exile, the psalms of disorientation often address this reality, and those of re-orientation engage the occurrence of returning from exile and beginning anew. Truly, these two of Brueggemann’s designations would apply not only to the challenges faced by the biblical Israelites, but of the Puritans and Pilgrims in New England, as well. Brueggemann writes regarding the nature of hymnody:

The problem with a hymnody that focuses on equilibrium, coherence, and symmetry...is that it may deceive and cover over. Life is not like that. Life is also savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved assymetry. In our time--perhaps in any time--that needs no argument or documentation.
(51)

To a people having left comfort, stability, even family and livelihood to venture into new and foreign lands, this experience of disequilibrium and imbalance was surely not unknown. And the popular orientation of the psalters, especially in the case of The Bay

Psalm Book, leads one to perceive the importance of these works as a means for a people to express their laments, their joys, and their despair over losses. The early Puritans were certainly a people in exile, and the words of the psalms would certainly speak to their reality.

One cannot exhaustively detail how the book of Psalms or the numerous psalters affected the lives of the early Puritans. However, as a divinely-inspired prayer book, the Psalms provided an important, even vital, outlet for the expression of the inner, spiritual, and even emotional selves of these early settlers in North America.

Conclusion

Horton Davies has cited the contributions of the early Puritans to English worship as “firstly, the restoration of the people’s rights to sing the Davidic Psalms in the vernacular; secondly, the versification of the psalms, that they might the easier be memorized by congregations and set to repetitive melodies.” (Hambrick-Stowe, 114) I would add an additional legacy to Davies’ enumeration. The Puritans provided an example of a community which sought not to conform scripture to their mode of worship, but rather to revolutionize their worship through observing ordinances contained within the biblical text. Correctly, they searched the scriptures and found a mandate for the singing of psalms. It was not a matter of taste or aesthetic impulse that led the Puritans to adopt metrical psalmody into their worship; it was a matter of divine necessity that they do so. Having discerned through study of the scriptures this understanding of the role of psalmody in worship, they adapted the ordinance for suitable practice in the churches.

Though one can argue the relative merits and discomforts of “lining-out,” the Puritans were conscientious on following through with their necessary course of action.

Psalm singing and recitation were vital components of early Puritan worship. Usage of the Psalms in worship is a practice much neglected in most Protestant churches.

However, I am struck most by the omission of even a Psalm reading in most contemporary Congregational worship services in which I have attended. It is a practice that needs to be recovered, especially by heirs of the tradition that saw in the singing of Psalms not simply musical accompaniment to worship, but divinely-ordained worship itself.

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