

# THE ENGLISH PSALTER

BY

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## PROLOGUE



REAT abundance of ghostly comfort and joy enters the hearts of those who reverently recite or sing the Psalms in their praising of Jesus Christ. The Psalms drop sweetness into men's souls, pour delight into their minds and enkindle their wills with the fire of love, making them hot and burning within and lovely and beautiful in the eyes of Christ. And those who persevere in their devotions he raises to the contemplative life and often indeed to the song and joy of heaven. The singing of Psalms puts the devil to flight, moves the angels to come to our assistance, banishes sin, pleases God, fosters perfection, puts away and destroys strife of spirit and makes peace between body and soul. It brings desire for heaven and contempt of earthly things. Truly, this shining book is a choice song before God, a lantern to lighten the darkness of this our life, health for a heart that is sick, honey to a sad soul, the worthiness of spiritual men, the tongue of hidden virtue. It is that which keeps the proud in meekness and kings as subject to beggars, caring for the children of God with a motherly affection. In the Psalms is so much excellence of wisdom and of healthful words that this book is called a garden enclosed, well fenced about, a paradise full of apples. Now with wholesome doctrine it brings driven and storm-tossed souls to a calm sea, now it threatens hell to the wicked. The song that delights hearts and teaches souls becomes a voice in the heavenly choir, and with angels whom we cannot hear we mingle words of praise, so that verily may he think himself far from the true life who has not the joy of this gift of wonderful sweetness, which grows not sour through the corruptions of this world but is everlasting in its worth, increasing by grace to the purest of sweetness. All gladness and earthly pleasures vanish away and at last fade to nothingness, but this book grows more and more enjoyable with time and, when love is most perfect, is most precious at the time of a man's death.

This book is called the Psalter, which name it takes from a musical instrument that in Hebrew is called 'Nablum' and in Greek a 'psaltery of song'. In English the word 'psalter' means 'to touch'. The instrument has ten strings and gives out a sound when it is plucked by the hand. So this book instructs us how to keep the ten Commandments and to work not for an earthly end but for heaven that is above. And so we give forth sounds that rise up at the touch of our hands when all that we do well is for the love of God. Also, this book is

divided into three sections of fifty Psalms, in which the three states of a Christian's religion are symbolised. The first is penance, the second righteous living, the third love of endless life. The first fifty end in '*miserere mei deus*', the second in '*misericordiam et iudicium cantabo tibi domine*', the third at '*omnis spiritus laudet dominum*'. This book is most used of all the holy writings in the service of Holy Church because it is the perfection of divine writing. For it contains all that the other books set out at length—the teaching of the Old Testament and of the New. Therein are described the rewards of good men, the torments of evil men, the discipline of penance, the growing in godly life, the perfection of holy men which reaches to heaven, the life of active men, the meditation of religious and the joy of contemplation, the highest that may befall a mortal man. Also, whatever sin takes from a man's soul, penance restores. There is no need to tell all this here, for you will find it set forth in the right place. This book of Psalms is called the book of the hymns of Christ. A hymn is the praising of God with song. Three things appertain to a hymn—the praising of God, the joying of the heart or mind, and an earnest desire for God's love. Song is a great gladness of mind in eternity and endless joy, breaking into the voice of praise. Well then is it called the book of hymns, for it instructs us to love God with gaiety and joy and sweetness of soul, not in the heart alone but also in the utterance of praise, teaching the ignorant.

The matter of this book is Christ and his spouse, who is Holy Church or the soul of every righteous man. Its purpose is to turn to Christ in a newness of life those who are defiled in Adam. The manner of teaching is thus: sometimes it speaks of Christ in his divinity, sometimes in his manhood, sometimes in those things for which he uses the voice of his servants. Also, sometimes it speaks of Holy Church in three ways: sometimes in the person of perfect men, sometimes in that of imperfect men, sometimes in that of evil men who are members of Holy Church in body but not in thought, by name and not by deed, in number and not in merit.

In this work I seek after no highflown language, but the easiest and most colloquial and that which is most like to the Latin, so that people who do not know Latin may be introduced to many Latin words through their English forms. In the translation I follow the literal meaning as much as I can and when I find no exact English equivalent I follow the general sense of the word so that they can read it and not fear making a mistake. In exposition I follow the doctors of the Church, for the book may fall into the hands of some malicious man who will declare that I did not know what I was saying and so do harm to himself and to others if he despise a work that is most profitable to him and everyone else.

## PSALM 56.

*Miserere mei deus, miserere mei, quoniam in te confidit anima mea.* 'Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me: for my soul trusteth in thee'. Have mercy on me so that I rise out of all sin, have mercy on me so that I bear tribulation, for my soul trusts in thee, not in itself, yearning for thy love.

*Et in umbra alarum tuarum sperabo donec transeat iniquitas.* 'And in the shadow of thy wings will I hope, until iniquity pass away'. In the overshadowing and coolness of thy mercy I hope to be saved from the heat of my desires. 'Until iniquity pass away', that is to say, until the end of the world, for always until then wickedness will not lack fuel.

*Clamabo ad deum altissimum, deum qui benefecit mihi.* 'I will cry to God most high: to God who hath done good to me'. I will not be idle, but I will cry with all the strength of my heart to the most high God, because I needs must cry to him. But I have proved his goodness for he who heard my cry was merciful to me.

*Misit de caelo et liberavit me, dedit in opprobrium conculcantes me.* 'He hath sent from heaven and delivered me: he hath made them a reproach that trod upon me'. He sent his Son from heaven and through him delivered me from the devil's prison, and 'them that trod upon me', which means the devil and his brood who torment righteous men, he committed to the shame of endless pain.

*Misit deus misericordiam suam et veritatem suam et eripuit animam meam de medio catulorum leonum. Dormivi conturbatus.* 'God hath sent his mercy and his truth: and he hath delivered my soul from the midst of the young lions. I slept troubled'. 'God hath sent his mercy and his truth' to my soul, forgiving my sins and punishing me mercifully, and so he 'delivered me', who was bound in chains of sin, 'from the midst of the young lions', from the common life of the lovers of this world who are the devil's whelps. Among them 'I slept', or I rested in vices, in filth and sin. But I was 'troubled' by them, that is, annoyed, which made me depart from them sooner and haste me to God.

*Filii hominum dentes eorum arma et sagitte et lingua eorum gladius acutus.* 'The sons of men, whose teeth are weapons and arrows, and their tongues a sharp sword'. 'The sons of men', that is to say, have grown old in malice, 'whose teeth', meaning the gnashings of their teeth in backbiting, are the 'weapons' with which they defend themselves in their fight against God, and the 'arrows' that they use to hurt each other. And 'their tongue', their scandalising speech, is a sharp sword slaying souls.

*Laqueum paraverunt pedibus meis et incurvaverunt animam meam.* 'They prepared a snare for my feet: and they bowed down my soul'.

That is, they set the snare of damnation for my soul under the guise of bodily pleasure and 'they bowed down my soul', they thought to make it stoop down to earth, away from the love of God.

*Foderunt ante faciem meam foveam et inciderunt in eam.* 'They dug a pit before my face: and they are fallen into it'. In other words, they worked diligently to make me know the lust of the flesh so that I might be captured, for it is a deep pit to all that pursue it, and 'they are fallen into it'. They hurt themselves, not me, for I realised that the joy of this world is but as a flower of the field.

*Paratum cor meum deus, paratum cor meum. Cantabo et psalmum dicam.* 'My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready: I will sing and rehearse a psalm'. They prepared pits and snares, but my heart is ready, O God, to do thy bidding, my heart is ready to suffer anguish for thy love. I will sing to thy praise in spiritual joy, and I will rehearse a psalm showing praise in thy honour. . . .

*Exsurge gloria mea, exsurge psalterium et cythara. Exurgam diluculo.* 'Arise, O my glory: arise psalter and harp: I will arise early'. That is to say, Jesu, who is my joy, makes me rise up in joy at the song of thy praising, in gladness of thy praising and, that it may be so, 'Arise psalter', which is gladness of mind about the life of contemplation. 'Arise harp', which is the purging of all vices with patience in tribulation. Thus I will arise early'; I will rise with joy at the general resurrection.

Jesu, be thou my joy, all melody and sweetness,  
And teach me how to sing  
The song of thy praising.

*Confitebor tibi in populis, domine, et psalmum dicam tibi in gentibus.* 'I will confess thee, O Lord, among the people: I will sing a psalm to thee among the nations'. Namely, I will love thee in my conversation with men and acknowledge the work of heaven among the people,

While in wondrous verse I sing  
The desire for thy praising.

*Quoniam magnificata est usque ad celos misericordia tua, et usque ad nubes veritas tua.* 'For thy mercy is magnified even to the heavens, and thy truth unto the clouds'. When men who were wretches shall be made equal with the angels at the resurrection through the mercy of God, then is his mercy magnified even to the heavens, and when the knowledge of God's truth, which is perfect in the angels, shall enlighten men, then does his truth reach even to the clouds.

*Exaltare super celos deus, et super omnem terram gloria tua.* 'Be thou exalted, O God, above the heavens and thy glory above all the

earth'. The Psalmist now repeats what he has just said, strengthening our faith.

PSALM 61, VERSE 2.

*Nam et ipse deus meus et salutare meum; susceptor meus, non movebor amplius.* 'For he is my God and my saviour. He is my protector; I shall be moved no more'. Truly, he is my salvation, for he is my God by grace, and my saviour, which means 'my redeemer', and he raises me from the troubles of this world to heavenly joy. Therefore I shall no more be moved from him, because

No greater joy I crave  
Than in my heart to have  
The love of his praising.  
This is the better part—  
Keep Jesu in thy heart  
And want no other thing.

*Done into modern English from the Thornton MS. by*  
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NOTE ON ROLLE'S LANGUAGE IN HIS PSALTER

Rolle declares, in his Prologue to his Psalter, that in his exposition he aims at a style that is easy and colloquial rather than highflown and one that will, at the same time, introduce those of his readers who know no Latin to a knowledge of that language. Therefore he will use English words most like to the Latin ones. An introduction of sixty long alliterative lines in couplets says that the work was undertaken by Rolle at the request of Margaret Kirkby, a recluse. Hence the necessity for an exposition in English, since women were not expected to be as familiar with Latin as men. But, for the religious life, a knowledge of Latin was useful, to say the least of it, and so he endeavoured to give some rudimentary instruction. The result of this mixed aim is an attempt to reconcile two irreconcilable dictions, the colloquial and the Latinate. Consequently this experimental English style is inclined to be clumsy and unidiomatic and lacking in flexibility although there are excellent patches where the colloquial phrases remind us that the work was addressed to an intimate friend or where the matter becomes infused with his own fervent and romantic mysticism. Only occasionally does he remember to help the weaker brethren in the acquisition of Latin, possibly because his own Latin was not of the best. There is, however, a startling example of such tuition in his exposition of the second verse of Psalm 61. He translates '*salutare meum*' as 'mi saveour' and then adds, 'pat is, mi bier', which means literally, 'that is, my buyer'. According to the *New English Dictionary* the use of the word 'bier' in this theological context is first found in 1300 in the Early English