

**THE ORTHODOX PSALTER**  
**By Father Lazarus Moore**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

The Psalms are among the most hauntingly beautiful songs and prayers that this world possesses. They are poems whose appeal is permanent and universal. As an anthology of 150 gems the Psalter is a work of consummate art, a thing of beauty which is a joy for ever; its loveliness increases. *The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express that same delight in God which made David dance* says the late C. S. Lewis.

The Bible is a presentation of the divine drama in which we are all taking part. The theme of the drama is the great acts and interventions of God, past, present and future. The Psalms are a distillation of the Old Testament and especially of the teaching of the Hebrew Prophets. They sum up the whole theology of the Old Testament. They are the quintessence of the faith and devotion of Israel. Yet they express the feelings and reactions not only of one nation but of all mankind. They reflect timelessly the universal hopes and fears, love and hate, joys and sorrows of the human heart. Individually they are the outcome of someone's personal experience, though not perhaps all of them. They reveal the varying moods of the human spirit from awestruck wonder at God's mighty acts and the marvels of creation to groping perplexity at the apparent prosperity of selfish scoundrels, from calm trust and deep certainty to cries of frustration and desperation bordering on despair. In these ancient poems we see the fundamental unity of mankind and of the Old and New Testaments. The unity is that of Promise and Fulfillment.

If the relic of a saint or loved one is dear to us, how much more precious is everything connected with Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life. The Psalter was both His Prayer Book and Song Book. While dying on the cross, the only portion of Holy Scripture that He quoted was the Psalter. Of His *seven last words*, four of them are echoes from the Book of Psalms: *My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?* (Ps. 21:2; Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34); *I thirst* (Jn. 19:28; Ps. 41:2; 62:2; 142:6); *It is done, accomplished, finished* (Ps. 21:32; Jn. 19:30); *Into Thy hands I entrust My spirit* (Ps. 30:6; Lk. 23:46).

**Fullness and Fulfillment**

We only realize the full significance of the Psalms as we read them in Christ the Truth, through His eyes, and in His Spirit. Faith is vision. Unbelief is blindness. *If the good news is veiled, it is veiled only to those who have lost their way. When the Old Testament is read, a veil lies over their minds. Only in Christ is the veil removed. The minds of unbelievers are so blinded by the god of this world that the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ cannot dawn upon them. God Who told light to shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ* (2 Cor. 4-6). *So let all Israel know for certain that God has made Jesus Whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah* (Acts 2:36).

Israel failed to respond to the divine call and commission to give God's light and love to the world. The vine lifted out of Egypt (Ps. 79:9; Mt. 2:15) is Jesus; the true Vine (Jn. 15). As the true Israel He fulfils Israel's mission, so that from the Cross and Resurrection the new and true Israel is the community of those whose hearts

receive by faith the divine Word spoken in Him (Heb. 1:2). His life is offered that it may flow in our veins as the Blood of the New Covenant, *the fruit of the vine* (Mk. 14:24), the love that conquers death (1 Cor. 15:54-57). When the risen Lord walked and talked with Luke and Cleopas, *He began with Moses and all the Prophets, and explained to them the passages which referred to Himself in every part of the Scriptures*. At Emmaus He added, *This is what I meant when I said, while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the law of Moses and in the Prophets and Psalms was bound to be fulfilled* (Lk. 24:27, 44).

The songs of Israel find their full meaning only in the New Adam. The Psalmist's voice is his Master's voice. It was *the Spirit of Christ in the Prophets foretelling the sufferings in store for Christ and the glories that would follow. And it was revealed to them that it was not for themselves but for you that they were administering those very mysteries which have now been announced to you through those who preached the Gospel to you in the power of the Holy Spirit* (1 Pet. 1:11). Christ's birth, sufferings and death, His triumphant resurrection and ascension, and His coming in judgment, are all clearly portrayed in the Psalms, not merely as historical events but as perpetual and saving realities. The eternal Spirit transforms history into theology. St. Athanasius the Great says that the line of the Psalmist, *Open your mouth wide and I will fill it* (80:11) refers to receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Spirit is the fulfilment of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms.

### **Correspondence and Recapitulation**

The Christian Church accepted the Old Testament as sacred scriptures. The Apostles and Christian preachers and teachers cited passages of the Old Testament as prophecies of the events of the Gospel. They also saw correspondences between things and events under the old and new covenants. The Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Law and the Covenant have their counterpart in the redemption of mankind through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the giving of the new covenant in His blood (1 Cor. 11:25) and the new commandment which fulfils the law (Jn. 13:34; Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:10). The temple at Jerusalem has its counterpart in the temple of the Church composed of living stones (Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). The heavenly manna has its counterpart in Jesus as the heavenly bread of life (Jn. 6:32-58). The creation of the earthly man has its counterpart in the new creation born in the death and resurrection of the Heavenly Man Who is the Lord from Heaven (Jn. 12:24; 1 Cor. 15:47-49; 2 Cor. 5:17). Adam, the head of a sinful race of mortals, has his counterpart in Christ, the second Adam, the New Man, the head of a race of immortals (1 Cor. 15:45-49). In all these ways the new covenant recapitulates the old covenant.

Similarly Christ was seen to be both priest and victim (Heb. 8:1—9:15). He is the sacrificial lamb and also the victorious king (Jn. 1:36; 18:37). He is the good Shepherd and also the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Ps. 22; Jn. 10:11; Rev. 5:5). He is the Son of Man foreseen by the Prophet Daniel (7:13, 14) destined to receive an eternal kingdom, and also the Son of God foreseen by the Prophet David (Ps. 2) destined to reign over all creation. Jesus fulfils the role of Israel by attaining the triumph of His kingdom and exaltation through humiliation and obedience to the point of death (Mk. 14:21; Heb. 2:5-9; Isaiah 53).

The Church also understood that Jesus was the Word (Jn. 1:14; 1 Jn. 1:1; Rev. 19:13). He was Himself the utterance of God's love and grace, light and truth in

the world. The utterances of the Old Testament had been partial, incomplete, fragmentary, preparatory, prophetic. In Jesus we have the fullness and finality of the divine utterance. Jesus embodies the divine utterance both in His teaching and in Himself. The Word and the Person are completely identical. The Word Who became flesh (Jn. 1:14) was in origin and originally God (Jn. 1:1), ever at work with the Father and the Spirit in the creation of the world (Jn. 5:17), ever giving life and light to men and angels (Jn. 1:9). And so we see that the Word is a Person. Life is not something but Someone (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21). The whole pageant of the past is recapitulated in the gracious personality of Jesus the Messiah. He recapitulates in His Person the whole destiny of mankind (Eph. 1:10). God has predestined men to become *conformed to the image of His Son* (Rom. 8:29).

### **The Church and the Bible**

Under both Old and New Covenants the Church preceded the Bible. The essential role of the Church, as of the individual Christian, is to bear witness to experience, to what has been seen and heard (Acts 1:8; 4:20; 22:15). Man's vocation and destiny are supernatural (Heb. 3:1; Rom. 8:29; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Cor. 1:2). Scripture is a communication of divine light to guide us in the way of perfection (Mt. 5:48). To know Christ (Truth) is to love Him and be free (1 Jn. 4). So a supernatural revelation of God's nature, will and purpose is essential. Such is the Word of God contained in the Bible. *It is a love-letter written by our heavenly Father and transmitted by the sacred writers to the human race on our pilgrimage towards our heavenly country* (St. Chrysostom). Readers of the Bible have the Church to guide them. *No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private interpretation, nor can it be understood by one's own powers. For no prophecy ever originated in the human will, but holy men of God spoke as they were prompted by the Holy Spirit* (2 Pet. 1:20). It is the Church's mission to interpret the Bible. People who live humbly and honestly in the fellowship of the Church have their minds conditioned and attuned to understand the scriptures as the revelation of the mind of God. (1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5; 2 Pet. 3:1)

### **The Nature of the Psalms**

It would be a mistake to think that the Psalms are a beautiful expression of nature mysticism, inspired by the natural beauty of the countryside and the soothing sounds of softly murmuring streams. They are rather the war-songs of the Prince of Peace, the vigorous shouts and cries of the whole man, responding or reacting with his whole being to the One Who comes to him in all the circumstances of life. Jesus Himself tells us that we shall never see Him until we say in every situation, *Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord* (Lk. 13:35). In this matter of the sanctification of the total man made to love God with his whole nature (Lk. 10:27), Israel was unlike the religions of the world. The New Israel, the Church of Christ, inherits and continues this tradition and should develop it in an even more thoroughgoing manner.

The Jews prayed and worshipped with spirit, soul and body. They beat their breasts, clapped their hands, stretched out their arms, fell prostrate on the ground; they sang, they shouted, they danced; they used drums, tambourines, cymbals, castanets, bells, horns, trumpets, pipes, and various stringed instruments. We find these features in the Psalms. St. Isaac the Syrian says, *Every prayer in which the*

*body does not participate and by which the heart is not affected should be reckoned as an abortion without a soul.*

Varieties of prayer are found in the Psalms: Worship and Bowing Down, Love and Adoration, Meditation and Contemplation, Stillness and Watching, Waiting and Listening, Hope and Desire, Acts of Faith and Trust, Praise and Blessing, Exaltation and Magnification, Repentance and Confession, Weeping and Groaning, Exultation and Thanksgiving, Joy and Gladness, Vows and Affirmations, Exorcism and Adjuration, Surrender and Submission, Petition and Intercession. We need to learn afresh the Christian use of the Psalter. One reason for the neglect of the Psalms in our devotional life is the disproportionate attention given to critical and historical research in modern biblical study, to the almost total exclusion of the vital meaning and purpose of the Word of God. *To be ignorant of Scripture is not to know Christ* says St. Jerome.

### **Practical Use of the Psalter**

The Church never merely studied the Psalms. They were her chief book of devotion. Her divine Founder had quoted them, had used them in prayer, had explained them to His disciples, and had died with them on His lips. The Apostles ordered the faithful to use the Psalms both in their personal lives and in community worship (Jas. 5:13; Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). St. Jerome tells us that at St. Paula's funeral in 404, the Psalms were sung *now in Greek, now in Latin, now in Syriac; and this not only during the three days that elapsed before she was buried, but throughout the rest of the week.* He also says that the Psalms sung in churches were also sung in the fields: *The toiling reaper sings Psalms as he works, and the vine-grower, as he prunes his vines, sings one of David's songs.*

At first the Psalter was the only hymnbook available. Many both of the clergy and laity knew it by heart. St. Germanus in Constantinople and St. Gregory in Rome refused to consecrate as bishops men who were unable to recite the Psalter. A disused canon so ruled. Even when the church services began to be compiled, the Psalter was the Church's first service book, and it retains that position to this day. All the services draw heavily upon the Psalms. The Psalter is a quarry and treasury of Christian prayer and devotion.

### **Poetic Characteristics**

The Psalms are poetry and this version retains the original poetic form by printing the lines as in the Septuagint. Much is lost when the Psalms are printed as prose. Hebrew verse does not rhyme except occasionally and accidentally. It is based on what is called parallelism, and is mostly in the form of couplets. The second line of the couplet may be a repetition of the theme in different words, or a contrast, or a heightened emphasis. There is rhythm, but little metre. Often there is a play on words, or assonance, or alliteration, or some figure of speech. These are not reproducible in translation. But the parallelism is clearly retained. If the line endings occasionally rhyme, that is quite incidental as in the original Hebrew.

It must not be thought that the parallelism of Hebrew poetry merely means that the second line of every couplet simply repeats the thought of the first line in different words. Far from it. It may enrich or amplify the thought of the first line, or it may modify it in other ways. For example, the Prophet Isaiah writes (55:7):

*Let the wicked forsake his ways and the sinful man his thoughts.*

Or take the opening words of that wonderful outburst of praise which the Holy

Spirit put on Mary's lips (Luke 1:46):

*My soul magnifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour*

This does not mean that soul and spirit are therefore identical (cp. 1 Thess. 5:23). Rather it indicates that the second half of the couplet is a result of the first. With my soul I magnify the Lord (*soul* including understanding, intellect, memory, imagination, desire, will). As a result of my growing consciousness and realization of the greatness and goodness and glory of God, my spirit is filled with joy and I exult in God my Saviour. So the inspired lines are found to contain a simple technique for the praise of God.

### **Divergences**

This new translation of the Psalter has been made primarily for use in the services of the Orthodox Church. It will be found to follow closely and often word for word previous versions made from the Hebrew. It will also be found to differ widely in many places. This is because the Orthodox Church is committed to the Septuagint version of the Bible, which was the Bible of the whole Christian Church during the first thousand years of its existence. It is also the version of the Bible that was used and quoted by our Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostles, though they also occasionally referred to the Hebrew. That is why it will be found that this version of the Psalms tallies in almost every instance with the Psalms quoted in the New Testament whereas the Hebrew Psalms are often widely divergent. For example, Psalm 4:5, *Be angry, yet do not sin*, is quoted word for word by the Apostle Paul (Eph. 4:26). The Hebrew gives quite a different reading.

If it is asked why the Septuagint often differs so totally from the Massoretic text, the answer probably is that Hebrew was a kind of shorthand, entirely without vowels when the Psalms were written. It is easy to see that a word like *brd* could be rendered bread, bird, bard, brayed, broad, beard, bored, breed, broody braid, bride, bred, buried. It is not surprising that there are variant readings. What is surprising is that the Septuagint reproduces a vast amount of the Hebrew text almost verbatim, so that we can often check the Massoretic. Another reason for differences in the Septuagint may be that the Seventy translators used a Hebrew version that differed in many respects from the Massoretic text.

We cannot give footnotes to explain how we arrive at every puzzling rendering of the Greek, as it is not within our scope. If we take a single instance, it will be seen how lengthy and complicated such explanations could be. In Psalm 101:27, *change them like clothing* could be rendered, *roll them like clothing*. Actually there is a variant reading at this point, some texts reading *roll*, others *change*. As the thought suggested is that of a person rolling or stripping off a worn-out garment, we believe that the word *change* faithfully conveys the sense of either Greek word and also the meaning of the Hebrew original. In fact, the idea of change and renewal and the rebirth of the soul as a new creation is a basic concept throughout Holy Scripture (cp. Jn. 3:3-5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:10; 4:24).

### **Songs with a Difference**

The Psalms provide food for the *fed up* and heavenly bread in the wilderness. But what about the stone-age ethics? How does King Og aid our sanctification or help our prayer? In some of the Psalms we seem to be thirsting not for God but for our enemies' blood. Sometimes we seem to be howling war-cries with a tribe of

savages. How can we speak the truth in love with Hebrew tribals who even sink to sacrificing their sons and daughters to demons? (105:37)

The purpose of God's written word of which the Psalms are a part is to make known to men the saving truths that God has revealed to us about Himself in His eternal Being and about His action in time and place and His plan for the new world order. Christian theology is essentially the knowledge of God and His will revealed to man through God's action in history, which is truly *His story*. Orthodox theology as a unity of knowledge is a means to an end that transcends all knowledge. This end is union with God. The Psalms sum up the whole salvation history and theology of the Old Covenant. The lights and shadows of the total panorama are all here.

So the Psalms are unlike the sacred books of the world religions. The Bible is the record of the life of a community offered by the Church as divine revelation. We see the living God in the movement of events. It is not merely the history of a progressive revelation, but history as revelation. The meaning of the events lies in man's meeting with God. The prophet, like the priest, is a *public person*. His encounter with God is not merely private experience, like that of the mystics and sages of the world religions. The pressure of public events is the normal occasion of the prophet's meeting with God. The truth which the encounter reveals to his mind is public property. God's choice of the prophet is not an act of favouritism, but an invitation or call to special responsibility (cp. Amos 3:2). The word of God which gives the vital meaning to history always has a twofold action: it is the word of crisis and judgment, and it is the creative word of renewal and regeneration. *If anyone is in the Truth, there is a new creation* (cp. 2 Cor. 5:17). Judgment is followed by the *new heavens and new earth* (2 Pet. 3:13), and the *universal restoration of all things* (Acts 3:21). The light that judges us, transfigures and saves us (Jn. 12:47). *In Thy light we see light* (Ps. 35:10). The supreme message of the Psalter is that the vision of God, to know and love Him, to trust and obey Him; and to offer Him the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving is eternal life and happiness (Jn. 6:40; 17:3; Lk. 10:25- 28; 1 Pet. 1:8f).

### **The Divine Initiative**

The Psalms are the Bible in miniature. By a kind of divine tom-tom they drum into our consciousness the truth that we meet God in the world of persons, things and events. Here and now we are to pass through the visible and transient to the invisible and true. Yet the initiative always rests with God. The word of God comes out of the everywhere into the here, and breaks into our life from beyond us. The Bible is a record of God's search for man. The people of God are not those who have a special bent or natural genius for religion. Far from it. All the saints would agree that they had a natural bent for unbelief and waywardness, but for the grace of God. *We love because He first loved us* (1 Jn. 4:19). *When we were still sinners Christ died for us* (Rom. 5:8). *It was when we were sick and powerless to help ourselves... when we were enemies that we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son* (Rom. 5:6, 10). *His was the first birth out of death* (Col. 1:18). Last but not least, the Psalms remind us of our response to God's love which means life from the dead. It is the response of obedient love and loving obedience. *I love Thee, O Lord, my strength* (Ps. 17:1).

In the Psalms David speaks as if he were not going to die, as if God would not leave him in hell or allow him to see corruption (15:10). Yet David died and his Kingdom vanished. Now hear the Apostle Peter at Pentecost:

*Men and brethren, I can speak freely to you about the Patriarch David: he died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. But being a prophet, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of Christ, when he said that his soul would not be left in hell, nor would his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised to life, and we are all His witnesses (Acts 2:29f).*

The Psalms were the utterances of both David and Christ. God Who spoke in David and Who became incarnate as the *Son of David* was speaking of His own coming into visibility as the divine Messiah and of His plan of salvation. This plan is only fully revealed in its fulfilment, when men are filled with the Holy Spirit of God. The incarnation of the Word as the visible image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) is the supreme demonstration of the divine initiative and intervention. It is the climax of God's search for man and the discovery and redemption of the lost image and likeness in the Saviour's death and resurrection.

### **The Messiah**

A striking and mysterious figure looms larger and larger, and gradually takes shape, as we read and re-read the Psalms. He is the Son of God, appointed King on Zion to rule the nations (Ps. 2). He is addressed as God, His kingdom is to last for ever, His reign is gentle and just, yet strong as iron. He is lovely with a beauty beyond the sons of men, and because of His love of justice and goodness He has a joy surpassing His fellow men (Ps. 44). He is a King and Judge Who shares the throne of God. He is a Priest, not in the Levitical line, but an Eternal Priest-King like Melchizedek (Ps. 109). His reign will bring lasting peace and justice, all kings and nations will worship Him, He will take special care of the poor and destitute, and in Him all the families of the earth will be blessed (Ps. 71). Yet this Sovereign Ruler of nations Whom all mankind will worship will undergo terrible sufferings, will be treated as an outcast, a worm and not a man, will endure outrageous handling by men who have become more like wild beasts: bulls, lions and dogs. And they will strip Him and pierce His hands and feet, and will then stand and gloat over Him (Ps. 21). Yet when He comes in judgment to claim His Kingdom, it will be a world-wide assembly, including rich and poor alike, who will all worship Him and partake of a sacrificial meal in His honour (Ps. 21, 93, 95). Such is the King Messiah, portrayed especially in 5 Messianic Psalms: 2, 21, 44, 71 and 109. They foretell the advent, kingdom, priesthood, sufferings, death, resurrection and ascension of the coming Redeemer. But different facets of the same face and person are sprinkled throughout the Psalter, and we need them all to get the full portrait.

### **Figures and Symbols**

The Psalms foreshadow in figure and symbol the way of life and freedom fully revealed only in the New Adam (Rom. 5:12f., 1 Cor. 15:21f.), the New Noah, father of the new race who rise from the baptismal waters (1 Pet. 3:20f; 2 Pet. 2:5), the Prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15, 18; Jn. 1:21, 46; 6:14, 32; Acts 3:22). So He explains the miracle of the bronze serpent which Moses fixed to a sign-post or standard and which brought a change of heart (Num. 21:9): *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life (Jn. 3:14).*

But the crucial and decisive event of the old covenant history was the Exodus from Egypt, which the Psalms mention so frequently. Just as the Christian remembers and relives the sacrifice of Christ by the celebration of the Liturgy, so the Jew recalls and reenacts the Exodus by the celebration of the Passover. This act of worship is not just an escape from the present into the past, but a means of actual experience. The Passover ritual says: *In every generation it is a man's duty to imagine that he himself has escaped from Egypt* (cp. Ex. 13:8).

As Moses led the Hebrew slaves out of Egyptian bondage through the Red Sea towards the Promised Land and celebrated their escape or deliverance by the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, so Christ the true Lamb of God by His sacrifice on the cross leads men through the red sea of His life-giving blood out of the real slavery of sin into the glorious freedom of the children of God, which is heaven on earth or the Promised Land. The great theme of history is the conflict between belief and unbelief. Human societies like human beings live by faith and die when faith dies (Rom. 1:17; Jas. 2:20). Faith is the light in which we see God. As we grow in faith and love, the mystery and unity of the Exodus and Christ's Passover becomes more and more a matter of personal experience. Yet the experience is not the essential reality, but only an effect of the reality which is infinitely beyond experience, namely God in us: *Christ in you* (Col. 1).

By faith in Christ (Jn. 5:24) and by the new birth (Jn. 3:3-5) we enter a new dimension of life and become amphibians, living at once in time and eternity. We are at the same time in the wilderness and in the Promised Land. *Our life is in heaven* (Phil. 3:20). *God has enthroned us with Christ in heaven* (Eph. 2:6). The Songs of Zion will tell us again and again that by faith we are Christ's body in this world (1 Cor. 12:27) and that He lives in us (Col. 1:27; 2:6; Gal. 2:20). *Be what you are!* they keep saying. *Be forgiven, be reconciled, be friends with God, be clean, be free, be filled with the Spirit, be whole, be holy, be children of God, be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven!* (Phil. 3:20)

### **Some Difficulties**

Some people object to parts of the Psalms because they seem to contradict the Divine law of love taught by Christ. But the mystery of the divine wrath and vengeance reveals the total incompatibility of evil with the divine nature. *You who love the Lord, hate evil* (Ps.96:10; Rom. 12:9). Judgment and vengeance belong to God and must be left to Him (Dt. 32:35). God's judgment is His appearance, manifestation, epiphany (Pss. 49:1-4; 79:2; 93:1). In its fullness this appearing or manifestation refers to the incarnation, when Christ becomes the visible criterion in Whose light we see light (Ps. 35:10). All the evil and malice of the world culminates in the crucifixion of Christ. When vengeance is left to God, it takes the form of the agony and death of the God-man. God takes His own medicine. With Christ we are to hate the reign of evil, the vile spirits and passions that prevent the reign of Christ in our hearts and in the world. As we hate and forsake sin, we become free to love and pray and labour for God's reign and rule on earth.

Spiritual things must be spiritually understood. People contrast spirit and letter. But what *letter* is there in the Word of God Who says Himself, *My words are spirit and life* (Jn. 6:63)? Truly *the letter kills* (2 Cor. 3:6). To a literalist the message and meaning of the Bible is bound to elude his most meticulous search. The resident aliens whom God's people are to drive out of Canaan are the enemies of the human soul. The harsh psalms are the strong weapons used by the Church to



exorcize and drive out evil spirits from the souls and bodies of men. *The weapons of our warfare are not material, but are powerful with God for the overthrow of the enemy's strongholds* (2 Cor. 10:4). The Word of God which is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) is given us to expel evil and idle thoughts and replace them by the divine light of the beauty of holiness and truth. *Let the word of God dwell in you richly* (Col. 3:16).

Other people object that they cannot sincerely say with some of the Psalms that they are blameless, innocent, faithful, holy; it seems hypocritical. Still others say that they do not share the agony and suffering of the Psalmist, that their knees are not weak from fasting, and how can they give thanks for joys and victories they have never experienced? The trouble with all these people is that they have lost the sense of solidarity and unity with all mankind in Christ, still less do they have a sense of the unity of all being in God.

After Pentecost when the Spirit restored men to unity, we read, *The whole body of believers had one heart and soul, and none of them called any of his possessions his own, but everything was shared as common property* (Acts 4:32). We cannot repeat too often that the Psalms refer to Christ and can be applied fully only to Him. But it is *Christ in you Who is the hope of glory* for you (Col. 1:27). *He ever lives to make intercession* in you, with you, for you (Heb. 7:25). The Psalms teach us to enlarge our hearts or consciousness to embrace all mankind. *Remember those who suffer as if you shared their pain* (Heb. 13:3).

Today we hear much of the priesthood of the laity. The Psalms, if used aright, compel us to exercise our priesthood and act as the voice of all mankind in Christ, the one Mediator Priest and Intercessor. We even act as the mouth of all dumb creation to thank and glorify God for His goodness. The Angels in heaven and all God's creatures are invited to join the divine praises. *To Him Who loves us and has washed us from our sins in His own blood and made us a kingdom of priests to serve His God and Father, to Him be glory and triumph throughout endless ages* (Rev. 1:5). As we pray with and for all mankind, we get a vision of hidden realities visible only to the eyes of faith, and we actually begin to see God's new creation taking shape. *When He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is* (1 Jn. 3:2). If we are faithful, God will keep us till the end. So St. Athanasius explains Psalm 93:14 thus: *The Lord will guard His people in their troubles and afflictions, and He will direct and guide them until His justice returns in judgment, that is, until Christ judges the world; for God has made Him our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness and our redemption* (1 Cor. 1:30). But disobedience always incurs God's Judgment (Jer. 44).

### **The Cross is the Key**

Og, Sehon, Pharaoh are so many troubles and trials. There is plenty of suffering and misery on earth (2 Tim. 3:12). We make use of it aright when we offer it in union with the sufferings of Christ. In union with Christ our sufferings assume infinite redemptive value, just as a drop of water thrown into a great river does all that the river does (Col. 1:24). In this way our sufferings are transformed into light and power and joy. We find true happiness by dying because we can only enter heaven by dying to earthly things (Acts 14:22). That is why the cross is the key to the Psalms, as it is the key to the Kingdom. *Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, merely a grain of wheat* (Jn. 12:24). It is when Christ is lifted up that He draws all to Himself into the unity of the Spirit. It is by

dying that Jesus has drawn all into the triumph of His Resurrection. So Caiaphas prophesied that *Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to reunite into one family the scattered children of God* (Jn. 11:51, 52).

### **Importance of the Psalter**

All the Psalms have as their aim the glorification of God. They were sung in the Temple, in the Synagogues, and in Jewish homes. Today they are used by both Jews and Christians, uniting us in praise. The Psalter is the hymnbook of the universal Church. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Book of Psalms. The Hebrew poets took these timeless religious experiences and made them the theme of their songs. The Psalms are poems intended to be sung. The Hebrew title means *Songs of Praise*. But they can be read with a song in the heart, they can be prayed in spirit and truth. The inspired poets of Israel reflect the spiritual experience of the human soul. So the Psalms belong to all mankind. As there is no book in the New Testament corresponding to the Book of Psalms, the Psalter belongs to both the New and Old Covenants and forms a bridge linking the Old and New Testaments. It is eloquent proof of the unity of the Bible. The Psalms constitute one of the most vital forms of prayer for men of all time. Their inspiration is expressly stated (2 Sam. 23:1-5).

*At the time when the Psalms were written they were not of such use to those among whom they were written as they are to us, for they were written to foretell the New Covenant among those who lived under the Old Covenant* (St. Augustine). The one great theme is Christ in regard to His inner life as the God-man and in His past, present and future relations with the Church and the world. The Psalter is the expression of the heart of the true man. It is the prophetic portrait of the mind and heart of the coming Saviour. God speaks to men in human words. What wonderful beauty there is in the words, *Let the lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice* (140), when applied to the one great sacrifice of our Redemption which was offered in the evening of the world and on the eve of the Passover by the stretching out of the Saviour's hands to embrace all mankind on the Cross! This we sing daily at Vespers. What profound significance we can see in the words, *I will not die but live and proclaim the works of the Lord* (117:17), when we refer them to the morning of the Resurrection and that first Easter Day, and the commission to the Apostles to make disciples of all nations! This we sing daily at Matins. On Easter Day itself we sing. *This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it* (117:24). And every day is the new day fresh from the and of the living God, *so let us keep festival* 1 Cor. 5:8).

### **Inspiration**

The inspiration of the Psalms as an integral part of inspired Scripture is vouched for and guaranteed by Christ the Truth, Who asked the Pharisees: *How is it that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls Christ Lord, saying, (Ps. 109:1). The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand till I put Thy enemies under Thy feet.' If David calls Him Lord, how can He be his son?* (Mt. 22:43-45). Christ classes the Psalms, the chief book of the *Chetubim* or *Hagiographa*, with *the Law and the Prophets* (Lk. 24:44). Inspiration is explicitly defined in 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Pet. 1:20, 21.

### **Date and Authorship**

The title of Psalm 89 attributes it to Moses. The psalm itself recalls how the first generation of Israelites were doomed to die in the wilderness for their infidelity and disobedience. So about 1280 B.C. some of the Psalms were probably being sung. The titles ascribe 84 of the 150 to David, who lived about 1000 B.C. So the earliest of the Psalms are well over 3000 years old, and the compilation covered perhaps 1000 years. There are indications of editing at different dates. For instance, after Psalm 71 an editor has added: *The songs of David the son of Jesse are ended.* But later we meet more Psalms attributed to David, evidently inserted by other editors (90, 92, 93 etc.). The Book of Psalms was perhaps completed for the Jewish canon by about 300 B.C. The Greek translation was made in Egypt about 250 B.C. by Jews of the dispersion.

We cannot summarize the matter of authorship better than by quoting the words of St. Gregory the Dialogist: *Who was the author? A very useless question as soon as we believe that the book was the work of the Holy Spirit Who dictated what was to be written. If we received a letter from a great personage, would we be curious to know what pen he used to write it?*

### **Historical Coverage**

Besides studying the past, we can sing songs about it. That is what the Psalmists did. The whole history of the world as recorded in the Old Testament, from the creation of the universe till after the Babylonian Exile, is put into poetry by the Psalmists. Psalm 136 looks back to the Babylonian Exile as a thing of the past (cp. also Ps. 125).

### **Unity and Divisions**

The Psalms form a single book. So our Lord refers to them (Lk. 20:42), and so do His Apostles (Acts 1:20). The Orthodox Church has divided the Psalter into 20 *kathismas* or sessions (perhaps because it is customary to sit during the reading of a *kathisma*). Each *kathisma* is further divided into 3 sections, marked by a *Glory*. At each *Glory* it is customary to stand and sing as follows:

***Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,  
now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.***

***Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Glory to Thee, O God.***

***Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Glory to Thee, O God.***

***Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Glory to Thee, O God.***

***Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.***

***Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,  
now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.***

### **Effect of the Psalms**

People talk of haunted houses. The Psalter is a house of prayer haunted by the Spirit of Christ Who inspired the Psalms. Used aright, they cannot fail to lift us above and beyond ourselves. They confront us with God and we find ourselves haunted by His presence and gradually brought face to face with Him. They bring our hearts and minds into the presence of the living God. They fill our minds with His truth in order to unite us with His love. The saints and fathers of the Church, like the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, were haunted by the living reality of the Redeemer revealed to the world in the Psalter. He is the Word of God hidden in these *words of God*. As you persevere in praying the Psalms, you will be drenched

with the Holy Spirit as the trees are drenched with the rain (Ps. 103:16), you will be rapt in God and penetrated from time to time with vivid intuitions of His action, your mind and heart will be purified. The pure in heart know God as the Father of mercies Who has so loved the world as to give His only Son for their redemption (Jn. 3:16), and they see Him making all things new (Rev. 21:5). They see and know Him not merely by faith, still less by speculation, but by interior and incommunicable experience. As we sing His glories, we are led by faith to see His vast activity in every aspect of life. *By beholding the glory of the Lord, we are transformed into His likeness from glory to glory by the Spirit of God* (2 Cor. 3:18). But this will only happen if we see Christ as the way, the truth and the life of the Psalms (Jn. 14:6), the great God in Whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). As we persevere in seeking His face, we find that the Psalms stir and arouse in us the will to believe and the will to love. By faith and love we pass into the realm of eternal reality, and new vistas of experience open before us (Jn. 5:24).

### **The Voice and The Voices**

The Church functions as a voice. Its ministers are *servants of the word* (Lk. 1:2). *The word of life was made visible. Life is a Person. The eternal life that was with the Father was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you may share our fellowship, the life we share with the Father and His Son in the unity of the Spirit, that our joy may be complete* (1 Jn. 1:1-4). *In one who is obedient to His word, the divine love has indeed reached perfection* (1 Jn. 2:5). In the Psalms many voices are audible. Sometimes it is the Psalmist who speaks, sometimes a fool, sometimes Israel, sometimes the soul, sometimes evil spirits, sometimes the Father, sometimes the Son, sometimes the Spirit. Sometimes the Messiah seems to be identified with Israel, as in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. With these swift transitions, it is often difficult at first sight to tell who is the speaker. As in the Psalms, so it is in our lives. *Be still and know I am* (Ps. 45:11). *Speak Lord, for Thy servant is listening* (1 Sam. 3:9). The good Shepherd says, *My sheep hear My voice* (Jn. 10:27). The voice of the Psalmist is the voice of Christ. The voice of the bride is the voice of the Bridegroom. *He who hears you, hears Me* (Lk. 10:16).

*And the Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'. And let everyone who hears say, 'Come'. And let everyone who is thirsty come, and let everyone who has the will to do so take the water of life as a free gift* (Rev. 22:17). Here the Spirit of God and the Church with one voice invite every living soul to come to the only fountain of life and happiness. Then every listening soul is told to cry out of the depths of his hunger and need, *Come!* Finally the thirsty and needy and willing are told to come and receive the water of life freely.

Here we have two comings: the final coming of Christ to the world and the coming of each soul to Christ. In fact, Christ comes to us continually in all the changes and chances of our lives, supremely in the mystery of communion (1 Cor. 11:23-30; Jn. 6:31-58), and in many special manifestations of His real presence (Jn. 14:19-23). The Psalms tell us that we cannot find satisfaction in sin or work or riches or culture or honour and glory. But in Jesus we find here and now satisfaction and happiness, pardon, purity and peace: *Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Christ), for they will be satisfied* (Mt. 5:6). **Pardon:** *In Him we have the forgiveness of our sins* (Eph. 1:7). **Purity:** *He has washed us from our sins in*

*His own blood* (Rev. 1:5). **Peace:** *My peace I give you* (Jn. 14:27). *He is our peace* (Eph. 2:14).

And so we watch in eager expectation for the coming of the Son of God in power and glory, praying and working for that golden age foreseen and foretold by the holy Prophets where God's will of perfect love is done on earth as it is in heaven. Let us take as our motto the words of the Psalmist: *I will live to please the Lord in the land of the living* (Ps. 114:9), *the Promised Land, the honeycomb of the earth* (Ez. 20:6 LXX), *peace beyond all understanding* (Phil. 4:7), *the joy of the Lord* (Mt. 25:23), *heaven within you* (Lk. 17:21), *divine life in the soul of man* (2 Cor. 5:15), *sharing the divine nature* (2 Peter 1:4). *He who has the Son has the life* (1 Jn. 5:12). *Come, Lord Jesus* (Rev. 22:20).

### **Extract from St. John Chrysostom's Panegyric on the Psalms**

*If we keep vigil in church, David comes first, last and central. If early in the morning we want songs and hymns, first, last and central is David again. If we are occupied with the funeral solemnities of those who have fallen asleep, or if virgins sit at home and spin, David is first, last and central. O amazing wonder! Many who have made little progress in literature know the Psalter by heart. Nor is it only in cities and churches that David is famous; in the village market, in the desert, and in uninhabitable land, he excites the praise of God. In monasteries, among those holy choirs of angelic armies, David is first, last and central. In the convents of virgins, where are the communities of those who imitate Mary; in the deserts where there are men crucified to the world, who live their life in heaven with God, David is first, last and central. All other men at night are overcome by sleep. David alone is active, and gathering the servants of God into seraphic bands, he turns earth into heaven, and converts men into angels.*