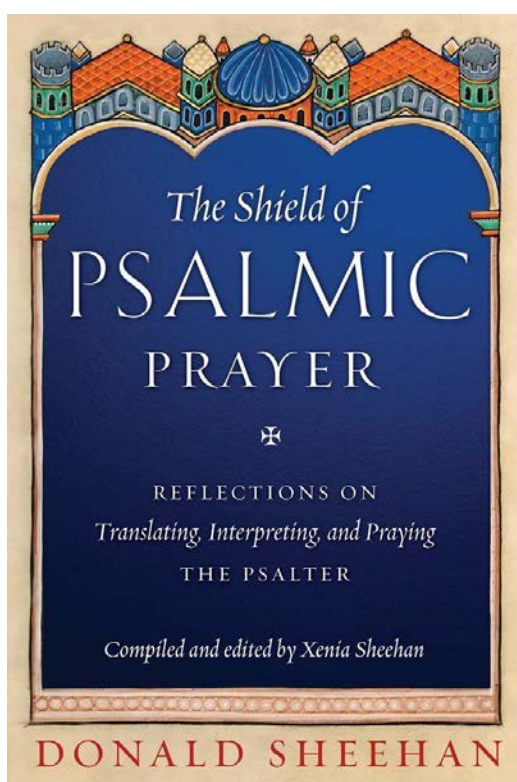


Donald Sheehan, *The Shield of Psalmic Prayer: Reflections on Translating, Interpreting, and Praying the Psalter*; compiled and edited by Xenia Sheehan, foreword by Sydney Lea. Chesterton, Indiana: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2020.

Reviewed by:

Priest Stephen Sharman, PhD



This book is a work of *pietas*, that is, a work which displays the veneration, respect and affection of Xenia Sheehan for her late husband, Don Sheehan. Out of her love for him and in order to introduce the reader to his scholarship, she has published a selection of his papers upon the Psalms. He had embarked upon a translation of the Septuagint Psalter into modern English and here Xenia Sheehan brings his reflections on that task to the attention of

his friends, colleagues and others. A translation of a text presupposes an in depth knowledge of the subject and in the pages of this book Don Sheehan amply demonstrates his knowledge. He was the Director of the Robert Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire, USA, a poet and a convert to Orthodoxy. The book consists of twelve chapters, a foreword by Sydney Lea, an introduction by the editor, Xenia Sheehan, and at the end a very useful glossary, an equally useful bibliography and several indices. Each chapter is preceded by an abstract which prepares the reader for what is to come. His intention is to teach us to pray the psalms and he achieves his goal.

Two quotations from the book give us a glimpse of the author's deep love for the psalms and for the presence of God Whom he finds within them. "I can only say something in Psalm-prayer touches me always with an undying freshness of heart" (p4), and "In other words, my experience of praying the Psalms is an experience of loving and being loved" (p6). We are in a world where profound scholarship leads into a world of devotion and pray where God is sought for and found because He Himself has sought for us and found us. In Chapter 3 (pp 36-52), titled "Five Conundrums of Translatability," we meet his thoughts about translating the Psalms. Here he explores, "the relationship between the original (or "Ur") Hebrew text of the Psalms, the second century BC Septuagint Greek translation and the much later reconstructed Masoretic Hebrew text upon which most subsequent Western translations have been based" (p36). As the chapter progresses, the reader discovers that Don Sheehan has a preference for the Septuagint Greek text. He argues that the Septuagint is the better version of the Psalms because it embodies Our Lord's Incarnation. He writes, "Christ is present in the whole of Psalms" (p240). In the following chapter, "The Angels Sing: Reflections on a Rule of Prayer" (pp53-68), the author studies the central place of the Psalms in a rule of prayer. We pray the Psalms and the Psalms pray in us.

The heart of this book about the psalms is a study of some of the psalms. Don Sheehan subjects psalms 1, 136, 150, 3, 142, 101, 44, 81, 77 and 118 to a thorough examination. He considers their structure, their themes and their role as ways to God. As always, he explores both the Septuagint Greek and the Masoretic Hebrew for the meaning of the text. He leads his readers deeply into the understanding of God which is found in the Psalms. The reader emerges from these chapters with a greater appreciation of the depth and breadth of Don Sheehan's scholarship. More importantly the reader has found God.

Don Sheehan has rooted his study of the Psalms deeply in the Tradition of the Orthodox Church. He quotes richly from the Church Fathers and the Fathers of the Desert. For example, He cites St Philemon stating that the Psalms "embrace everything in all the Divine Scriptures" (p56). He refers to St John Chrysostom, St John Climacus, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Isaac the Syrian and St Gregory Palamas. Among the moderns, he cites Fr Pavel Florensky and Bishop John Zizioulas. His reach extends to George Herbert of seventeenth

century England. This impressive catalogue of authorities is an indication of the depth of his scholarship. In addition, he shows his veneration of the Blessed Theotokos whom he presents as a model of humility and a devout student of the Psalms and of Holy Scripture. He writes, “And, to Orthodox Christendom the supreme model of such life-giving study is the Mother of God” (p184). In his book, she appears as a person bent over the pages of Holy Scripture as she reads and meditates upon their words.

This is not a book for the beginner. It is a dense book full of great riches which requires some preparation in order to get the most out of it. The author is at home with the technical vocabulary of academic theology which may be new to many readers. He uses such words as “noetic.” Fortunately, his editor has provided a useful glossary. Readers may be advised to look through the glossary before reading the book. This reviewer would have benefited by following this advice. Further, some knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages and a familiarity with Orthodox poetics would assist the reader. The author’s analysis of selected Psalms depends upon a detailed comparison of Greek and Hebrew words. The author does provide modern English translations for the words which is beneficial for those who do not know Greek and Hebrew. A life of prayer focussed on the Psalms is highly desirable. His presentation of the Psalms as a means of approaching our Lord Jesus Christ may be strange to people who have learned a different way of Biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, even the beginner can benefit from this book.

This reviewer wishes to disclose that he has recited the Psalms daily for much of his life using the English translation in the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England. This translation was made by Miles Coverdale (1488-1568). Sheehan’s book has introduced him to new ways of seeing a text which he knows well.

About the reviewer: Father Stephen Sharman is a priest at St. Nicholas parish in Narol, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.