

The Psalms of David, Translated from the Septuagint Greek
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THE PSALMS
OF DAVID

Translated from the
SEPTUAGINT GREEK



DONALD SHEEHAN

Foreword by CHRISTOPHER MERRILL

By Dn. Lasha Tchantouridzé

No other Biblical text has received more attention in history than the Book of Psalms. It may well be that no other text in history has been interpreted, quoted, translated and commented upon as much. Called *tehillim*, the Praises, in the Hebrew tradition, the Book of Psalms is both a sacred text and a literary monument of universal significance.

There are two main authoritative texts of the Book – the Masorah, which defined the books of Jewish canon, and Septuagint or the translation by the seventy of Hebrew Biblical texts into Greek in III century BC. Donald Sheehan's translation is another important addition to the illustrious Septuagint tradition.

Donald Sheehan, a poet, a scholar and a subdeacon in the Orthodox Church, was a longtime teacher at Dartmouth College, Hannover, New Hampshire, and Director of the Frost Place. Subdeacon Donald reposed in 2010, and the current volume published posthumously in 2013, was prepared by his wife Xenia Sheehan and Hierodeacon Herman Majkrzak, with help and assistance from Don's many friends, and colleagues. In the acknowledgments, Xenia notes many hundreds of hours of dedicated work spent by Subdeacon Donald at translating the Psalter, and by others preparing his handwritten translation for publication.

Donald Sheehan approached the process of translating the Psalms as both an Orthodox Christian and a poet. He notes the following in the Preface:

Working from the 1979 edition of Alfred Rahlfs's Septuagint Psalter, my primary aim in making this translation was to create in English a body of poetry that, in employing the rich idioms of contemporary English poetics, would stand on its own in cadence and shape. My many years as a university teacher of both ancient and modern lyric poetry, along with my work of reading, writing, and translating poetry – both privately and professionally – guided me to see that each psalm possessed a unique *cadential shape*¹ in every line as well as in each whole poem (p. xv).

Sheehan has unique understanding of poetics of the Psalter text. In his brief analysis of some of the aspects of Psalter poetry and nuances of its translation he offers vivid visual descriptions of Septuagint Greek, Hebrew verbs and their English equivalents: “where the Hebrew moves oceanically, the Greek moves balletically... on every single page [of Septuagint], almost in every sentence and phrase, we can witness how the Greek language is dying to itself so that the Hebrew may live...” (p. xvii).

The authorship of the Psalms is traditionally ascribed to the biblical King David – this tradition is nowadays challenged bible researchers – some even doubt historicity of King David. However, in the first century AD the Book of Psalms was definitely considered a cornerstone, alongside with the Torah and the Prophets of God's message to His people. We read in the Gospel of Luke: “Then He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44).

Psalms are central in Orthodox Christian liturgical tradition, but most likely at least some of the Psalms were used in ancient Hebrew liturgical life as well. Sheehan's translation of Psalm 117² creates a strong impression that these praises were chanted at a formal service to the Lord with the refrain “for His mercy endures forever:”

¹ Here and elsewhere – emphasis in the original.

² Sheehan's translation follows the Septuagint numbering of the Psalter traditionally employed in the Orthodox Church.

- “Give thanks to the Lord, for he³ is good, for his mercy endures forever.
2. Let the house of Israel say he is good, for his mercy endures forever.
 3. Let the house of Aaron say he is good, for his mercy endures forever.
 4. Let all those who fear the Lord say he is good, for his mercy endures forever” (p. 134).

The liturgical aspect is even more pronounced in Psalm 135, in which “for his mercy endures forever” follows every verse:

- “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.
2. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his mercy endures forever.
 3. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his mercy endures forever.
 4. To him who alone does great wonders, for his mercy endures forever” (p. 157).

Not only are Psalms part of both Christian and Jewish liturgical life, but they are also examples of the most personal messages of worship and devotion communicated in the Bible. Throughout history millions have turned to Psalms for advise and encouragement, for inspiration and guidance. Immense power and attraction commanded by Psalms is influenced by various poetic techniques of which Sheehan discusses a few, among them “the experience of antinomy” (p. *xxxiii*). In modern times, antinomy has been used in philosophical writings by Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Vladimir Lossky, and others. Sheehan quotes Metropolitan Kalistos description of antinomy as “the affirmation of two opposed truths, which cannot be reconciled on the level of the discursive reason, although a reconciliation is possible on the higher level of contemplative experience...” (p. *xxxiv*). Sheehan sees antinomicalness as a descriptor of all Biblical and, indeed, human experience, “the experience of disjunction, the experience wherein human discursive rationality breaks helplessly apart in the face of – better, *in the teeth of* – dissonant, often harsh realities” (p. *xxxv*).

³ Sheehan does not capitalize pronouns for God. He explains his decision: “we are no worse off than a reader of the Greek in those passages where one must puzzle out who is speaking or being spoken to (as in the intimate dialogue between the psalmist and God in Psalm 90) or who is acting (as in the web of shifting pronoun referents in Psalm 104). I went on to adopt (with a few exceptions) the practice of the 1611 King James translators, capitalizing (besides place names, names of persons, and the first word of quotations) only those words used as names for God such as *Lord* and *Holy One, Most High, King, Holy Spirit, and Christ...*” (pp. xix-xx).

Although Sheehan's English translation does improve poetic qualities of Psalms, some readers may find some Psalm verses in his translation somewhat unusual. For instance, Psalm 118, one of the widely used Psalms in the Orthodox liturgical life opens thus:

"Blessed are the blameless in the way,
Who walk in the law of the Lord.

2. Blessed be those searching his testimonies,
Who seek him with the whole heart.

3. For the workers of iniquity
Have never walked in his ways.

4. Thou hast charged that thy commandments
Be kept most diligently.

5. O that my ways be all directed
To the keeping of thy statutes" (pp. 136-37).

Donald Sheehan's translation of Septuagint Psalter is, perhaps, the most poetic of all English-language Psalm texts available. As Archpriest John Breck of Saint Sergius Theological Institute in Paris notes in his preface to the volume, "Donald Sheehan has produced a translation that conveys "the literal" sense of the text with power and beauty" (p. xii).

In accordance with a thousand-year old Orthodox tradition, Sheehan divides the Psalter into 20 kathismata, and subdivides them in relevant number of stases. The Psalms are numbered according to the Septuagint numbering, and the verses are numbered according to the order established around a century ago by Alfred Rahlfs, a German scholar of Septuagint. Donald Sheehan's volume; however, is missing Psalm 151 – the Septuagint Book of Psalms, which is canonical in the Orthodox Church, includes Psalm 151: "I was small among my brothers; And the youngest in my father's house..." This psalm has always been in the Orthodox Christian canon, but it has been regarded as apocryphal by Roman, Catholics, Protestants and some Jews. More recently, the Dead Sea Scrolls discovery has shown that this psalm did indeed exist in Hebrew and was part of the Psalter in the ancient Qumran community. Regardless, Orthodox Christians and others, biblical scholars and general readers alike will find Sheehan's translation highly poetic and masterfully done.

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