

Review of *The Anglo-Saxon psalter*. By M. J. Toswell. (Medieval Church Studies, 10) Pp. xvi + 457 incl. 21 ills. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.

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The pervasive influence of the Psalms on Anglo-Saxon thought is a fact often acknowledged, but seldom explored in any depth. Jane Toswell's monumental study of *The Anglo-Saxon psalter*, the product of decades of deep and sustained engagement with the many ways in which the Psalms were 'at work' in Anglo-Saxon England, goes a long way towards redressing this scholarly lacuna. Although in her concluding remarks Toswell claims to have merely 'sketched the parameters' (p. 399) of Anglo-Saxon reception of the psalter, this study is in fact comprehensive in scope, opening up a wealth of new avenues for research. As the author acknowledges (p. 38), in places this book approximates to a (very useful) survey of the many (often neglected) Anglo-Saxon psalters – 'the largest group of manuscripts surviving from Anglo-Saxon England' (p. ix) – supplementing the catalogues of Neil Ker and, more recently Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge. But Toswell enlivens proceedings with a series of short, often fascinating, 'case studies' of individual psalters, translations and their readers.

In a useful introduction we are guided through early monastic and lay approaches to the psalter. Building on Geoffrey Shepherd's assertion that the Psalms were at the centre of Anglo-Saxon spiritual life, Toswell proposes that, given the wealth of available translations, any literate Anglo-Saxon poet probably knew the Psalms in both Latin and Old English (pp. 9-10).

Chapter i presents case studies of two clerics and one layman from early, middle and late Anglo-Saxon England, all of whom knew and used the Psalms in contrasting ways: first Bede, credited with the invention of the breviary psalter; then Alfred, who according to tradition translated the first fifty psalms into Old English prose; and finally Ælfric of Eynsham, the 'teacher monk' (p. [?]) whose homiletic writings and political philosophy are infused with his intimate, scholarly knowledge of the psalter.

Chapter ii offers insights into the ways in which psalter manuscripts were used and subsequently repurposed by both medieval and later readers. Toswell devotes most attention to the Paris Psalter, containing the Alfredian prose translation of Psalms i-l and the Old English metrical version of Psalms li-cl in parallel column to the Latin. But two less-studied manuscripts, the Salisbury Psalter, a product of the tenth-century English Benedictine Reform, and the Achadeus Psalter, a French psalter brought to Canterbury in the late Anglo-Saxon period where it acquired an Old English gloss, are also scrutinised for signs of post-Conquest use and ownership.

Chapter iii turns to the evidence of material culture, focusing on Davidic iconography in connection with Anglo-Saxon kingship. Here Toswell teases out evidence for the reception and interpretation of the Psalms from the most unpromising sources, among them a fragment preserved as an end-leaf in a Worcester manuscript which, by her own admission, is 'one of the least sexy surviving manuscripts of Anglo-Saxon England' (p. 183).

Chapter iv constitutes perhaps the most significant advance on existing scholarship in its re-assessment of the numerous interlinear Old English glosses contained in Anglo-Saxon Latin Psalters. While previous scholarship has treated these glosses as additions or accompaniments to the more-important text of the Latin Psalter, Toswell shows how, in many cases, the inclusion of the Old English text, usually a syntactically complete translation of the Psalter which may even have circulated separately, was clearly planned from the outset and, in some cases, given as much or even more prominence than the Latin. Toswell proposes, therefore, that these manuscripts should be considered as bilingual, rather than glossed, psalters.

Chapter v surveys Psalm-allusion and adaptation in Old English prose and verse, focusing on the Life of St Mary of Egypt, various iterations of the life of St Guthlac, Homiletic Fragment I, the Kentish Psalm and the Old English Metrical Psalms, to the last of which Toswell devotes considerable attention. Routinely overlooked in histories of English Psalm versification – which tend to begin with the Reformation – this plain poetic translation may well be the first complete verse translation of the Psalter into any modern European vernacular and appears to have enjoyed considerable

popularity from at least the tenth to the twelfth centuries.

Chapter vi presents a more speculative discussion of psalmic influence on the structure and themes of a range of Old English texts. While some scholars may greet with scepticism some of the analogies that Toswell identifies (for example, the alternating structures of lament and addresses to God in some of the wellknown Exeter Book 'elegies' are compared to the lament psalms), to an educated Anglo-Saxon reader better versed in the Psalms, such parallels might have seemed glaringly obvious.

Chapter vii returns to issues raised in chapter ii, briefly highlighting difficulties posed by the categorisation of some psalters as 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Anglo-Norman'. A couple of minor quibbles: on p. [] Toswell claims that David was the 'first anointed Jewish king', overlooking the fact that his predecessor, Saul, was also anointed by Samuel (1 Samuel X); Toswell also states on several occasions (for example, pp. 8, 155, 167)– without providing any evidence – that the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies include the name of King David, making English monarchs direct descendants of the Israelite king and, by implication, his descendant Christ. To my knowledge, David does not in fact appear in these largely fabricated lists of royal ancestors, though Christ, as father of Adam, does appear at the head of the West Saxon royal pedigree included sub anno 855 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

In their unwavering devotion to the psalter the Anglo-Saxons were not, of course, unique among early medieval Europeans, as Toswell acknowledges (p. 400). But where they differ significantly from their insular and continental neighbours, as this book convincingly demonstrates, is in their remarkable proclivity for Psalm-translation, from simple word-for-word gloss to free poetic paraphrase. This elegantly produced volume complements Jesse Billet's important study of the Divine Office in Anglo-Saxon England, as well as the recent monograph on English Psalms in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by Annie Sutherland, providing a much-needed reminder of the importance of psalmstudy in both Latin and the vernacular in the earliest centuries of English Christianity. Despite its length and often-descriptive style, the tone is personable, enlivened by personal anecdotes. Readers of this important book will enjoy following the author as she tracks down fragments of Anglo-Saxon psalters on a cloudy morning in Chichester records office (p. 177), or narrowly avoids disaster in the Bibliothèque nationale (p. 107 n. 30). Jane Toswell, like the generations of Anglo-Saxon students of the psalter to whom this study is devoted, is indeed psalteratus, and it is her eminently reasonable suggestion that, in order to even begin to understand the literature, art and culture of the period during which the Psalms played such a crucial role, it behoves all Anglo-Saxonists to follow her lead.

ST CROSS COLLEGE,
OXFORD

FRANCIS LENEGHAN