

## The Psalms in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England

Helen Appleton and Francis Leneghan

Helen Appleton

Balliol College, Oxford

[helen.appleton@ell.ox.ac.uk](mailto:helen.appleton@ell.ox.ac.uk)

Francis Leneghan

St Cross College, Oxford

[francis.leneghan@ell.ox.ac.uk](mailto:francis.leneghan@ell.ox.ac.uk)

In Fragment E of the twelfth-century Worcester *Soul's Address to the Body*, the doomed soul turns to the subject of Doomsday, stating ‘Þonne hit biþ isene, so hit on psalme seiþ: *reddituri sunt de factis propriis rationem*’ (ll. 40-41) [then it will be clear, as it says in the psalm: *they shall give account for their own works*].<sup>1</sup> Here, the the Psalter is invoked in order to attest to the awesome veracity of the soul’s words on judgement, for as the mutely suffering body would recognise, the authority of the Psalms stretches from their composition to the end of the world. However, this particular quotation is not actually from a psalm; in this instance, the poet of the Worcester *Soul's Address* draws instead upon the Athanasian Creed, although elsewhere in the text it is Psalms 49, 118 and 127 that provide the authorising allusions.<sup>2</sup> This poet’s labelling of a creed as a psalm is not as strange as it may initially appear; the Athanasian Creed was commonly sung and, together with other canticles, was regarded by many writers in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England

---

<sup>1</sup> Moffat, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Psalms are numbered according to the Vulgate numbering throughout this volume.

as a psalm: such was the centrality of the Psalter to their conception of collectively voiced penance, lament and praise.<sup>3</sup>

The repeated use of psalm quotation in this twelfth-century poem is representative of the literature of the period covered by this collection. For Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman writers, both clerical and lay, the Psalms were the key reference text. The Benedictine Rule, followed by all Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns from the tenth century Reform onwards, required the recitation of the entire round of one-hundred-and-fifty psalms in the course of a week; a well-chosen psalm-verse provided a ready-made prayer for almost every conceivable situation in the daily (and nightly) life of all those living under the Rule. Hence, for example, the tenth-century *Regularis Concordia*, compiled by Bishop Æthelwold and patronised by King Edgar, states that on waking in the night, a monk should first make the sign of the Cross:

Ideoque omni tempore nocturnis horis cum ad opus diuinum de lectulo surrexerit frater, primum sibi signum sanctae crucis imprimat per sanctae Trinitatis inuocationem. Deinde dicat uersum *Domine labia mea aperies*: dehinc psalmum Deus in adiutorium meum intende totum cum *Gloria*. Tunc prouideat sibi corpoream naturae necessitatem si ipsa hora indiguerit, et sic ad oratorium festinando psallat psalmum *Ad te Domine leuaui animam meam* [...].

In prima itaque oratione decantet tres primos paenitentiae psalmos, cum oratione dominica uti in sequentibus [...]. Inde ueniat ad secundam

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Athanasian Creed appears with the Psalms and Canticles in the tenth-century Salisbury Psalter, and in the fourteenth-century vernacular psalter of Richard Rolle. Toswell, p. 132; Kuczyński (1999), p. 214, n. 30. See also Waterland, esp. pp. 48-50. Anlezark briefly discusses non-psalm 'psalms' in his essay on *Ancrene Wisse* in this volume.

orationem ubi sequentes duos dicat psalmos pro rege et regina atque familiaribus [...]. Inde ad tertiam orationem ueniens, duos posteriores psalmos pro fidelibus defunctis decantet [...].

[Therefore at all times when a brother arises from bed in the night hours for the work of God, he shall first of all sign himself with the sign of the Holy Cross, invoking the Holy Trinity. Next, he shall say the verse, *Domine labia mea aperies* [Ps. 50.17], and then the whole of the psalm *Deus in adiutorium meum intende* [Ps. 69.2] with the *Gloria*. After this, having provided for the necessity of nature, if at that time he must, he shall hasten to the oratory saying the psalm *Ad te Domine levavi animam meam* [Ps. 24.1] [...]. For his first prayer, then, he shall recite the first three Penitential psalms [Pss. 6, 31, 37] with the *Pater noster* [...]. He shall now go on the second prayer in which he shall recite the next two Penitential psalms for the King [Pss. 50, 101], Queen and benefactors [...]. Passing thence to the third prayer he shall say the last two Penitential psalms [Pss. 129, 142], for the faithful departed [...].]<sup>4</sup>

Educated Anglo-Saxon laymen also prized the Psalter and drew on it as a source of consolation and strength in times of adversity. For example, Asser tells us that as a youth, King Alfred first learnt the ‘daily round’ and then collected his favourite psalms and prayers into a book that he always carried around with him for the sake of prayer.<sup>5</sup> It is unsurprising, then, to find that in the Old English prose corpus the Psalms are quoted far more than any other book of the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Symons, pp. 11-13.

<sup>5</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Cook, pp. 262-63.

The Anglo-Saxons also prized the Psalter as a material object. There are thirty-seven surviving psalter manuscripts from Anglo-Saxon England, many of which continued to be used well after the Norman Conquest.<sup>7</sup> M. J. Toswell has highlighted the eleventh and twelfth centuries as producing a ‘florescence of learning’ associated with the Psalter in England.<sup>8</sup> Just as Anglo-Saxon psalter manuscripts continued to be treasured post-1066, so the Psalms they contain remained of paramount importance to Anglo-Norman writers. For example, Orderic Vitalis turns to Psalm 13.3 in his description of the Battle of Hastings (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV.xiv):

Idem quoque iudex dominica nocte Anglos vindicavit, et furentes Normannos in cæcam voraginem præcipitavit. Ipsi enim contra præceptum legis rem alienum immoderate concupierunt, ac *veloces* (ut psalmographus dicit) *pedes eorum ad effundendum sanguinem fuerunt*; ideoque *contritionem et infelicitatem in viis suis offenderunt*.<sup>9</sup>

[The righteous Judge avenged the English on Sunday night, when the furious Normans were precipitated into the concealed trench; for they had broken the divine law by their boundless covetousness; and, as the Psalmist says: “Their feet were swift to shed blood,” whereupon, “sorrow and unhappiness was in their ways.”]<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, an Anglo-Norman chronicler uses the Psalms to reflect upon this key moment of transition between Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England. In

---

<sup>7</sup> See Gretsches, p. 6; Toswell, pp. 376-77.

<sup>8</sup> Toswell, p. 365.

<sup>9</sup> Le Prevost, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> Forester, p. 486.

schoolbook narratives of English history the Battle of Hastings marks a neat dividing line between the two periods, but this is an Alexandrian solution to the Gordian knot of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>11</sup>

Scholarly interest in the role of the Psalms in early medieval England has never been higher, with the recent publication of M. J. Toswell's *The Anglo-Saxon Psalter* (Turnhout, 2014), Annie Sutherland's *English Psalms in the Middle Ages 1300-1450* (Oxford, 2015), and *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation*, edited by Tamara Atkin and Francis Leneghan (Cambridge, 2017).<sup>12</sup> This essays collected in this volume complement these studies, highlighting links between pre- and post-Conquest English religious life. Some essays focus on how psalms were used, adapted and incorporated into prayers and other texts: focusing on the famous ninth-century English prayer-book, the Book of Cerne, Imogen Volkovsky examines the relationship between the Abbreviated Psalter and psalm-singing in the Harrowing of Hell; Kate Thomas takes a different approach to the salvific nature of the Psalms by highlighting their use in Anglo-Saxon medical remedies; James Sargan's essay considers the influence of Psalm 37 on *The Life of Christina of Markyate*; and Daniel Anlezark concludes this volume by suggesting what the use of psalms in the thirteenth-century rule *Ancrone Wisse* reveals about its female audience's knowledge of the Psalter. Two essays focus on one of the most interesting and unusual early English psalters, the Paris Psalter, which contains Old English prose and verse translations of the Psalms, together with the Latin text of the Romanum psalter: Emily Butler looks at the role of the compiler, focusing on the *tituli* which precede each psalm; Anya Adair reassesses the role of 'filler' words in

<sup>11</sup> For a recent discussion of continuities between pre- and post-Conquest English, see Treharne (2012).

<sup>12</sup> See also the classic study by Kuczyński (1995), which though focusing on late medieval England also discusses Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman psalms and psalters.

the Old English *Metrical Psalms*. Laura Slater and Alexandra Verini focus on the Psalter as a book and its readers in pre- and post-Conquest England: using the cult of St Kenelm and an unusual image of King David dancing, Slater sheds new light on the possible origins and intended recipient of the Winchcombe Psalter; Verini examines the St Albans Psalter, arguing that textually and visually the volume is designed to foster a sense of community. Together, these essays highlight the diverse ways in which the Psalter enriched early English Christian thought.

The editors would like to extend their warmest thanks to all our contributors and to Hugh Magennis and Odin Dekkers at *English Studies* for their support and encouragement for this project. We would also like to thank Annie Sutherland and Jane Toswell for their valuable advice.

### **Bibliography:**

Atkin, Tamara and Francis Leneghan, eds. *The Psalms and Medieval English*

*Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017.

Cook, Albert S. *Biblical Quotations in Old English Prose Writers*. London:

Macmillan, 1898.

Forester, Thomas, trans. *Orderic Vitalis: The Ecclesiastical History of England and*

*Normandy*, 4 vols. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853-1856. Vol. 1, 1853.

Gretsch, Mechthild. *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform*,

Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 25. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1999.

- Keynes, Simon and Michael Lapidge, trans. *Alfred the Great: Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' and Other Contemporary Sources*. London: Penguin, 1983.
- Kuczynski, Michael P. *Prophetic Song: The Psalms as Moral Discourse in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- . “The Psalms and Social Action in Late Medieval England”. In *The Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture of the Middle Ages*, edited by Nancy van Deusen, 191-214. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Le Prevost, Augustus, ed. *Orderici Vitalis Angligenæ, Coenobii Uticensis Monachi, Historiæ Ecclesiasticæ Libri Tredecim*, 5 vols. Paris: Apud Julium Renouard et Socios, 1838-1855. Vol. 2, 1840.
- Moffat, Douglas. ed., *The Soul's Address to the Body: The Worcester Fragments, Medieval Texts and Studies*. East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press 1987.
- Sutherland, Annie. *English Psalms in the Middle Ages, 1300-1450*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Symons, Dom Thomas, ed. and trans., *The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- Toswell, M. J. *The Anglo-Saxon Psalter*, Medieval Church Studies 10. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.
- Treharne, Elaine. *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020-1220*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Waterland, Daniel. *A Critical History of the Athanasian Creed: Representing the Opinions of Antients and Moderns Concerning it: With an Account of the Manuscripts, Versions, and Comments, and such other Particulars as are of Moment for the Determining the Age, and Author, and Value of it, and the*

*Time of its Reception in the Christian Churches.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1724.