

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PARAPHRASES

A few months ago a friend kindly lent me The Scottish Paraphrases by Douglas J MacLagan, a comprehensive account of the origins and contents of "Translations and Paraphrases in Verse of several passages of sacred scripture" (to give the collection its full title), which was published in Edinburgh in 1889. Some of the reflections prompted by this book may be relevant to the Sunday by Sunday concerns of readers of "the Record".

### HISTORICAL

Although one thinks of metrical psalms as the characteristic diet of Scottish reformed praise, a few versions of other scripture passages were included in the pre-1650 psalters. After 1650, the intention to provide scriptural songs was never lost sight of, but no attempt was brought to fruition. In 1741 the General Assembly appointed a committee to consider the matter again and four years later a collection of 45 paraphrases was sent down to presbyteries for consideration; a revised version followed in 1751. But after 1755 the subject lapsed until 1775, when the Assembly appointed another committee, which revised the 45 paraphrases and prepared 22 more. The book thus compiled was presented to the Assembly of 1781, which again transmitted it to presbyteries for consideration, but "in the meantime allowed it to be used in public worship, in congregations where the minister finds it for edification". And on this provisional authorisation the book gradually built up its popularity. It lost its separate identity on the publication of CH3 in 1973, but that book contains 22 hymns derived from the Paraphrases, most of which (as one supposes) are in regular use.

MacLagan describes in detail the lengthy deliberations which led to the publication of the Paraphrases, quoting the minutes of Assembly and of various presbyteries. Naturally the work relied heavily on a few enthusiasts. Hugh Blair was a member of the Presbytery of Edinburgh when the 1745 version was before them, and also of the Assembly committee of 1775. "How glorious Zion's courts appear" (CH 294) is by Blair out of Watts. John Logan was also a member of the 1775 committee and had a hand in "The Saviour died, but rose again" (CH 293) among other pieces. John Morrison sent several contributions to the committee from his manse at Canisbay, and three of them are still loved - "Come let us to the Lord our God" (CH 69), "The race that long" (168) and "Twas on that night" (237). The leading member of the 1775 committee seems to have been William Cameron, who at that time was only a layman licensed to preach. He is thought to have amended about half the pieces in the book, including eleven of those still in CH3.

The authorship of 12 of the original 45 paraphrases, including six of those in CH3, is unknown, but may be supposed to be connected with the committee of 1745. MacLagan gives a surprisingly voluminous list of Scottish writers of spiritual songs who published work while the Paraphrases were in gestation, but if the compilers used any of this material, he does not seem to be aware of it. Neither did they borrow anything from the enormous volume of hymns being poured by Charles Wesley or from other English contemporaries such as Cowper, Newton, Joseph Hart or John Cennick. They drew upon three older English writers - Nahum Tate, Watts and Doddridge - and on Addison for three of the hymns appended to the Paraphrases in 1781. This suggests a conservative attitude to contemporary writing, and also that the tone of English evangelical religion was foreign to Scotland. The Assembly would be chary of admitting hymns which might be tinged with the Arminian doctrine of universal redemption.

The year 1745, in which the Assembly sent the first edition of the Paraphrases down to presbyteries, was destined to be famed in history for more stirring events. The Presbytery of Edinburgh does not seem to have met (at least, not to discuss this business) during the few months that Prince Charles Edward was in residence at Holyroodhouse, but they resumed their study of the draft soon after his departure, and met on the very day of Culloden - "but by reason of the few members present delayed proceeding upon the Psalmody."

#### TEXTUAL AMENDMENT

MacLagan observes that "as a matter of principle, the Paraphrases stand as a conspicuous warning of the confusion arising from hymn-tinkering (splendid word!); as a matter of fact, however, they have in many cases benefited from the changes made upon them". I think both parts of this judgement are just. It is regrettable in the present ecumenical climate that Scots do not sing the same versions as the English and Americans of "I'm not ashamed to own my Lord" (CH 591), "Hark the glad sound" (160) or "While shepherds watched" (174). On the other hand, it is the Scots version of e.g., "Father of peace and God of love" (398) and "How bright these glorious spirits shine" (533) which have become universal. That even the greatest work may be capable of improvement is shown in the last couplet of "Blest be the everlasting God" -

We walk by faith as strangers here

But Christ shall call us home.

"But" is Cameron's word; Watts wrote "Till". A subtle and powerful emendation.

#### WIDER INFLUENCE

Rather more than a dozen of the Paraphrases seem to be in common use in current English or American hymn books, several of them with unaltered texts. Perhaps

no more than five Paraphrases of indubitable Scottish origin have gained general acceptance furth of Scotland - "Behold the mountain of the Lord" (CH 312), "Come let us to the Lord our God" (69), "The race that long in darkness pined (168), "The Saviour died but rose again" (CH293) and "Where high the heavenly temple stands" (CH 295). A creditable list of exports, 200 years after publication.

#### MUSIC

Maclagan does not say how the Paraphrases were sung. In 1745 the psalmody of Scotland consisted of twelve tunes, all in Common Metre. (This excluded the Old 100th) So the first version of the Paraphrases was entirely in that metre, three pieces having been altered from Short Metre originals. By 1781 one or two Long Metre tunes seem to have become known, since four of the 22 paraphrases then added, and two of the appended hymns, are in L.M. Since then the Paraphrases have attracted music of good quality, mostly of 18th century origin; the sober excellence of the tunes has no doubt contributed to the lasting popularity of the words.

The most remarkable musical settings inspired by the Paraphrases are the "short anthems" derived from Christopher Tye's metrical version of the Acts of the Apostles (1553), published by Novello 100 or so years ago. In these anthems verses from the Paraphrases are married to what are in effect psalm tunes "in reports", the editor being Thomas Oliphant (1799 - 1873), a native of Perthshire who was an active member of the Madrigal Society (in London) for 40 years and who laid the foundations of the British Museum's music catalogues. I know of seven Tye - Oliphant - Paraphrase compositions; they include such unlikely texts as "How still and peaceful is the grave" (Par 4)(Blair) and "Mock not God's name with honours vain" (Par 17)(Cameron). "O God of Bethel" in the Church Anthem Book comes from this stable, and so does the tune Southwark (CH 22).

#### FIDELITY TO SCRIPTURE

The minutes of the Presbytery of Paisley dated 22 April 1747, quoted by Maclagan, contain a shrewd thrust against "loose", "copious" or "redundant" paraphrases, that is to say, versions which do not stick closely to the scripture. "If", they say, "such loose paraphrases be admitted, the doctrines of man, the private interpretations and distinguishing tenets of the various parties into which Christians are now divided may be grafted upon the Divine Oracles and imposed upon the consciences of our worshipping Assemblies." This warning derives its cogency from an underlying belief that the great Reformation achievement in public worship was to put the Word of God into the mouths of the people of God. Other gatherings may sing political ditties or social slogans if they will, but a Scots congregation is entitled to assume that what it is bidden to sing is the Word of God. Any song which is not unequivocally based on scripture may therefore deceive the unwary

or offend the scrupulous. Most of us cannot follow this argument to its logical conclusion of excluding all hymns of human composition, but when we dislike a hymn chosen for worship, is it not because we resent the imposition on our consciences of the "private interpretation" or "party tenet" that it seems to contain? It is Sparrow-Simpson's private interpretation of the events of Good Friday that my conscience abhors in Stainer's cantata; and as regards party tenets, how many hymns give the status of divine oracles to good causes which their authors want us to support or (worse) which our grandfathers once supported? Whatever may legitimately be said in sermons or prayers, the only safe theme of praise, is praise.

But that leads to the more difficult question of fidelity to scripture as a quality of the music. By its intrinsic power or by association the music we sing in church can inspire or strengthen belief in the truth of the words to which it is set, but it may also distort their message. An example which is almost ludicrous - a ministerial friend once suggested to me that "Onward, Christian soldiers" could be sung to the tune of "Land of hope and glory". This would seem to me to confuse the church, in the singer's mind, with Edwardian ideas of empire. On the other hand, if the hymn were sung to the innocent ditty by Haydn for which it was intended (English Hymnal 643), its sub-christian boastings would be reduced to the naivety of a children's procession. Similarly, it seems to me that some of the tunes to which "At the name of Jesus" (CH 300) is sung make a bombastic mockery of this intensely scriptural picture of Christ's glorious humility, and that only Vaughan William's King's Weston is free from "private interpretation" and "party tenet", and lets the message of the words shine through the music. (Also, to understand the message completely, restore from A & M the two verses left out of CH 300). On the other side of the coin, there are tunes, too little used, whose serenity and freedom from party association lift the singer's heart to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Among such I include Caithness (CH 395) and Song 24 (CH 64).

I think therefore that the principles upon which the Paraphrases were compiled, as epitomised by the Paisley Presbytery in 1747, are relevant to the choice of church praise today. Yet the Paraphrases themselves, says Maclagan, were accused of party bias by some members of the Free Church Assembly of 1846: they were too moderate. Perhaps (might one say today?) that is why they have worn so well.

THOMAS BLACKLOCK

Life was hard for two of the Paraphrase authors. Thomas Blacklock (1721 - 91) was the son of a bricklayer in Annan; in infancy he lost his sight through small-pox. As a boy he wrote poetry, and this attracted the notice of a patron who sent him to

Edinburgh University. At the age of nearly 40 he was nominated by the Crown to be minister of Kirkcudbright, but his appointment was opposed by the parish and presbytery, solely because of his blindness, and the case went to the General Assembly. (Is there anything topical in this story?) The Assembly decided in his favour, but his ministry at Kirkcudbright was not successful, and he retired to Edinburgh, where he received students as boarders and pupils. Aberdeen University made him a DD in 1767 and in 1786 his warm response to Burns's Kilmarnock edition dissuaded the poet from emigrating to Jamaica. (That is the nearest that Burns gets to the Paraphrases.) Paraphrase 16 ("In life's gay morn") is an accurate mirror of Thomas Blacklock's experience.

#### MICHAEL BRUCE AND PARAPHRASE 58

Do I need to remind readers of the Record that Michael Bruce was a weaver's son, educated at the village school of Kinnesswood, at Edinburgh University and at the theological hall of the Associated Synod at Kinross? He wrote various poems and also hymns for a village singing-class, and he died in 1767 at the age of 21, while still a student. After his death John Logan borrowed his papers, and it has been disputed ever since whether Bruce was not the true author of poems subsequently published by Logan. Julian's Dictionary considers that Bruce probably wrote four of the Paraphrases and verse 3 of "Behold, the mountain of the Lord". (The rest of it dates from 1745). If he wrote any of these Bruce would be the only Seceder who contributed to the collection. "Where high the heavenly temple stands" (Par. 58, CH 295) noticeably differs from the "moderate" tone of the rest of the book, which may point to Bruce as its author. I also believe that singing this Paraphrase with understanding can contribute to ecumenical dialogue today.

It is of course based on a few verses from the Epistle to the Hebrews. I have heard it suggested that this epistle is a collection of homilies delivered at the eucharist. However that may be, the writer expected his exposition of Christ's high priestly calling to lead his readers to a more faithful attendance at the Christian mysteries (10, 22-25) and his teaching about Christ's offering of His body (10,5) and blood (9,14) was addressed to people for whom normal Sunday worship was the eucharist. The passage which has been versified in the Paraphrase speaks of Christ's sufferings on earth as having their counterpart in his eternal intercession for mankind in heaven. It does not mention either the Last Supper or the Sacrament; but if you read from Hebrews or sing the Paraphrase at a celebration of the Sacrament what happens? The Sacrament is then linked to the heavenly intercession in the same kind of relationship as bound the Last Supper to the Passion. Take the first word of the Paraphrase. "Where" does the heavenly temple stand? Obviously, not "above the bright blue sky", and to say "not up there, but out there" does not help much.

Spatially, the "where" is nowhere that we can point to; spiritually it is everywhere, in every region of earth where Christ's presentation of Himself to the Father hovers over our holy tables, waiting to unite our earthly worship with his own intercession and adoration. And consider the word "remembers" in verse 4. Does it not enrich our understanding of "This do in remembrance of Me" to be reminded that the command is matched by a promise to remember us which is being fulfilled with eternal faithfulness? The word "remember" is a "copious" addition to the text of Hebrews. The author may have borrowed it from the dying thief. Possibly he also knew that it occurs in the Dies Irae - Recordare, Jesu pie.

The belief that there are two actions in the eucharist, the rite conducted by the church and the presentation by Christ in the heavenly places of His one perfect sacrifice, has been regarded as a Roman or Orthodox "party tenet". Study of Hebrews should correct such a restrictive attitude. In Paraphrase 58 the Church of Scotland has given other churches a hymn in which congregations may sing their way to an ecumenical understanding that the eucharist is the appointed means by which the church's worship and supplication are lifted into her Lord's adoration and intercession in the Father's presence. And the hymn is well served by a tune whose solemn harmonies and Lutheran origins fit it to carry so mighty a theme.

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## CAP THIS

The wife was a 'regular', the husband very irregular. But both went to Service, and were handed the usual Order of Service sheet with Intimations. As they took their seats, she turned on him angrily: You certainly gave yourself away - asking how much for the programme.

Next Sunday, Divine Service in this Church - the East end at 11 am., the West end at 3 pm. Children will be baptised at both ends.

JKS REID