
Psalter Introductions (selection)

Introduction

One of the translations traditionally thought to have been produced under the auspices of Alfred of Wessex is a prose rendering of the first fifty Psalms, uniquely extant in an oddly-shaped manuscript known as the Paris Psalter, which furthermore contains the remainder of the 150 psalms in alliterative verse. The Psalms are little read in university, for all the usual reasons: the subject matter is thought tedious, and they are “only” translations after all. The Psalms are, however, of great cultural importance as the most widely copied and sung texts of the Middle Ages. What is more, the Prose Psalter prefaces most of its 50 psalms with a brief exposition on the context and subject matter of the song, and these introductions are well worth reading in their own right. Below are the introductions to Psalms 2–10.

Manuscript

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 8824

Text

2. (a) Ðæs æfteran sealmes capitul is gecweden *psalmus David*, þæt ys on Englisc “Dauides sealm.”
(b) Forþæm he ys sealm gecweden, forþi he seofode on þæm sealme, and mænde to Drihtne be his feondum, ægðer ge inlendum ge utlendum, and be eallum his earfoðum; (c) and swa deð ælc þæra þe þysne sealm sincgð be his sylfes feondum, and swa dyde Crist be Iudeum.
3. (a) Ðysne þridan sealm Daudid sang þa he fleah Absalon his sunu, and seofode þa yrmðe to Drihtne. (b) Swa deþ ælc þæra manna þe þisne sealm singð: (c) his sylfes earfoðu, ægðer ge modes ge lichaman, he seofað to Drihtne. (d) Swa dyde Crist þonne he þysne sealm sang: (e) be Iudeum he hine sang, and be Iudan Scarioth, þe hine læwde, he seofode to Drihtne.
4. (a) Þe feorða sealm ys gecweden Dauides sealm and Dauides sang, (b) forði ælc þæra sealma þe swa gecweden byð þæt he sy ægðer ge Dauides sealm ge Dauides sancg, (c) ælcne ðæra he sancg besone mid weorode. (d) Ac ða he þysne sealm sancg þa gealp he and fægnode Godes fultumes wið his feondum; (e) and swa deð ælc welwillende man þe þisne sealm singð, (f) and swa dyde Ezechias þa he wæs ahred æt his feondum, (g) and swa dyde Crist ða he wæs ahred æt Iudeum.
5. (a) Ðe fifta sealm ys gecweden Dauides sealm, (b) þone he sang be his sylfes frofre, (c) and be herenese ealra ðæra rihtwisena ðe secað yrfewardnesse on heofonrice mid Criste, (d) se ys ende ealra ðinga. (e) And ælc mann þe þisne sealm singð he hine singð be his [sylfes] frofre; (f) and swa dyde Ezechias þa he alysed wæs of his mettrumnesse; (g) and swa dyde Crist þa he alysed wæs fram Iudeum.
6. (a) Daudid sang þysne syxtan sealm be his mettrumnesse and be his earfoðum, (b) and eac be þam ege þæs domes on domesdæge; (c) and swa deð ælc þæra þe hine singð; (d) and swa dyde Crist þa

he on eorðan wæs: (e) he hine sang be his earfoðum; (f) and eac Ezechias be his untrumnesse.

7. (a) Þysne seofoðan sealm Daudid sang þa he seofode his ungelimp to Drihtne. (b) Þæt wæs þa Absalon his sunu hine adrifen hæfde of ðam rice, (c) þa hine teonode [and wyrigde] Chus, Geniminis sunu. (d) Þa seofode he þæt to Drihtne, (e) and swa deð ælc mann þe þysne sealm singð: mænð his earfoðu to Drihtne; (f) and swa dyde Crist, þa he on eorðan wæs.
8. (a) Þysne eahteoðan sealm sang Daudid þa he wundrade Godes wundra, se wylt eallum gesceaf-tum; (b) and eac he witgode on ðam sealme be þære wuldorlican acennednesse Cristes.
9. (a) On ðam nigoðan sealme Daudid hine gebæd to Drihtne, (b) and him þancode þæt his sunu and eac oðre fynd him ne mihton eall þæt yfel don, þæt hi him geteohod hæfdon. (c) And on ða ylcan gerad hine singð ælc rihtwis mann be his sylfes feondum. (d) And be þam ylcan hine sang Crist þa Iudeas hine woldan don mare yfel ðonne hig mihton; (e) and swa dyde eac Ezechias ða his fynd hine ne meahton ateon swa hy woldon.
10. (a) Þysne teoþan sealm Daudid sang þa he wæs adrifen on þæt westen fram Sawle þam cynge, (b) þa his geferan hine lærdon þæt he hine þær hydde swa þes spearuwa; (c) and swa ylce þa rihtwisan þe hine singað, hi seofiað be heora feondum ægðer ge gesewenlicum ge ungesewenlicum; (d) and swa dyde Crist be Iudeum þa he þysne sealm sang.