

# Early Baptist Writers of Verse.

CHEARE, BUNYAN, KEACH.

**M**Y subject might easily be mistaken for one of a merely dilettante order; but only by those who are ignorant of the elements that went to the making of early Baptists. They were not "idle singers of an idle day"; their verses were not the outcome of loitering moods and luxurious conditions. Halcyon days and assured material possessions afforded them no opportunity for cultivating the company of the Muses. The only leisure found by them for putting their thoughts into metre and rhyme were periods of imprisonment. Nor did the austere language of Zion allow of any appeal to Pagan sources for the kindling of the poetic flame; their one fount of inspiration was the Holy Spirit.

Three writers only are included in my scope at this time, all belonging to the seventeenth century, and all prison writers. viz., Abraham Cheare, John Bunyan, and Benjamin Keach. Cheare died in gaol, Bunyan spent over twelve years in imprisonment. Keach endured incarceration, and was condemned to stand upon the pillory at Aylesbury with a painted paper upon his head, with the inscription: "For writing and printing and publishing a schismatical book." This book was openly burnt by the public hangman.

Cheare, the eldest, was born 28 May, 1626, and died 5 March, 1667-8; Bunyan, born 1628, closed his pilgrimage 1688; Keach, the youngest, born 1640, lived on till 1704. And in their verses the same order may be observed. Cheare dated some lines 1663, a year later Bunyan and Keach published their earliest poems. A compact assemblage of facts as to the dates and publications of these early verse-writers may not be unworthy the work of our Society, and may include data not always easy to find. In the case of Cheare, much help has been derived from Mr. Henry M. Nicholson's history of George Street Church, enriched in 1904 by many extracts from the records at Plymouth and Exeter. The name appears there in many forms, Chare, Chaire, Cheere, Chere, Cheare, which last seems what he himself preferred.

Four publications bearing his name are extant. In August 1656 he joined with four other "weak and unworthy children"

in emitting "Sighs for Sion." Two years later he and Robert Steed issued "A Plain Discovery of the Unrighteous Judge and False Accuser," namely, Richard Bellamy of Tiverton; a copy of this is owned by our President. Soon after his death, a friend who had been constantly with him printed his "Words in Season," covering 294 pages. Then on 12 February 1672-3 came forth the work which enshrines most of his verse. This proved so popular that three if not four editions were called for within a year, this being the time when the penal laws were not enforced; and it was reprinted even in 1708. This work again was composite, but Cheare's verse occupies seventy-six pages, and Jessey's prose only sixteen, the editor bringing up the total to ninety-eight. My copy is one of the second edition, but is nevertheless dated 1673. The title is sufficiently long, after the fashion of the times. But on the ground of it being a pioneer book, as well as upon other points of absorbing interest, it claims complete transcription. It runs thus:

"A Looking Glass for Children. Being a Narrative of God's gracious Dealings with some Little Children; Recollected by Henry Jessey in his life-time. Together, with Sundry seasonable Lessons and Instructions to Youth, calling them early to remember their Creator: Written by Abraham Chear, late of Plymouth.

"The Second Edition, Corrected and Amended. To which is added many other poems very sutable. As also some Elegies on Departed Friends: made by the said Abraham Chear. All now faithfully gathered together, for the benefit of Young and Old by H. P. . . . London, Printed for Robert Boulter, at the Turks-Head in Cornhill, 1673."

To these books, available still, must be added a letter, and the early records of the Plymouth church, borrowed and summarised by Dr. Rippon about 1800, in his Register, volume 3, page 273. Crosby stated loosely that he was "ejected" from Plymouth, and then ministered at Looe; mistakes corrected even by Ivimey. Drawing on the sources named, we obtain the following sketch of his life.

He was the fifth child of John Cheare, who leased two of the four Fulling Mills built by Sir Francis Drake in Plymouth; and he was bred to his father's trade, retaining the lease of one mill till a year before his death. When free, he never lived out of the town a month together, except for one journey to London. He was put into the trained bands which were called out in 1644 to resist the siege by the King, but he owns that he never

was accounted worthy of promotion to be so much as a corporal; this was natural, as he was only eighteen years old. He also says that for some few weeks, unknown to him and against his will, he was mustered a chaplain to the fort, but quickly got himself discharged of that again. This shows that within a few years he had awakened to religion; as to which his own account is that about 1648, he being convinced of his duty to the Lord, by evidence of Scriptural light, joined himself in a holy covenant to walk in all the ordinances of the Lord blameless, to the best of his light and power, in fellowship with a poor and despised people.

The records in Rippon's hands began with that year, and showed that he was then chosen pastor, a great responsibility for a young man of twenty-two. Rippon adds that his call "is said to have been signed by 150 members," but he evidently doubted the hearsay, even if it be remembered that many lived as far afield as Looe, Penryn, Falmouth, and Holsworthy, and that he alludes to his "frequent little journeys." He gives a detailed account of the baptism of Captain Langdon in Cornwall, in a letter among the Gifford manuscripts at Bristol.

In 1651 the church bought a site on the Pig Market and set apart a house for meeting, where three years later it was disturbed at worship by Thomas Arey, the Quaker missionary. Association life had begun by now in the west, but Cheare does not seem to have joined in this till after Jessey's tour of 1655. Messengers went from Looe and Plymouth to the meeting at Exeter on 6 October 1656, but Cheare's name does not appear as signing the minutes. He was evidently marked as full of promise, for the Bridgwater church suggested that his church ought to set a man free for general itineracy; and it was in this year that he joined with Forty, Pendarves, Glasse, and Steed in the Sighs addressed to their churches. In 1658 he was again at the Dorchester Association. Next year the Presbyterians came into power, and the Baptist Association meetings seem to have ceased, while at Plymouth the constables began prosecuting those who were absent from church in sermon time.

With the Restoration, Cheare's serious troubles began. At Easter 1661 he was in Exeter gaol for "encouraging religious assemblies," but he was freed after three months, probably in connection with the coronation, and promptly resumed his work. The Presbyterians were still in local power on 26 June 1662 when he wrote to a friend in prison, "My Father graciously indulges me and the lambs here, giving us an undeserved covert even where Satan's Seat is, while other flocks are dispersed and

scattered." But the Royal Commissioners to enforce the Corporation Act arrived in August, and installed persecuting Episcopalians into office. On the seventeenth he preached a farewell sermon, foreseeing that matters would not stop with ejecting parish ministers on Bartholomew's Day. Sure enough, the Oath of Allegiance was tendered to him, under an Act of 1610, and as he declined to take any oath, he was committed by the new mayor to Exeter gaol. Several letters he wrote thence fell into Rippon's hands, and fortunately he printed one of the earliest, written 17 September to William Punchard. While speaking plainly of the holes of the earth, slaughter-houses of men, walls enclosing good and bad, yet he found comfort in the thought that a week in a prison gave plainer discovery of a man's spirit than a month in a church.

He was given two or three opportunities of reconsidering, and taking the oath; Baptists were busy discussing in print whether this were permissible, and both opinions were held. Cheare, however, still declined, and at Midsummer Sessions 1663 he was at last sentenced for premunire. This involved outlawry, forfeiture of all property, imprisonment during the royal pleasure. In August 1665 he got leave to visit his people, but was soon discovered at large and imprisoned at the Plymouth Guildhall for a month. On 27 September he was sent to the little island of St. Nicholas in the harbour, and there he stayed till death.

His friend and apologist shows that the head and front of his offending consisted in being a ringleader of a resolute and uncompromising sect. That he was never concerned in, nor truly charged with any plot, mutiny, or tumult; that he never caused any disturbance, or gave the least occasion of fear or jealousy. Thus this loving and tender-hearted man, whose offence simply was the leading of people to worship God after the precedents of the primitive Christian Church, was not only unjustly imprisoned, but became a victim of the harsh treatment he was called upon to endure. He died triumphantly, however, and the precious little book of which we speak was one of the chief fruits of his long incarceration.

His editor, H. P.—possibly one of the Punchard family, of London—under the inspiration of our author, rises into verse himself in commending Cheare's work. He says:

"Go little Book, and speak for them that be  
Launch'd with great safety to Eternity;  
Engaging others, by what they did find,  
Their everlasting Peace chiefly to mind.

Observe the Lessons given by Abram Chear,  
That they your Soul may unto Christ endear."

Accounting for the production of these efforts, he says: "Here follows some of the Fruits of Mr. Abraham Chear's spare hours improvement, whilst a Prisoner: Made and directed to some he was nearly related to, and dearly affected."

One of the most touching items in the book is Cheare's own account of his imprisonments, described as "Verses affixed to the Wall of the Prison, at the Guildhall in Plymouth: where A. C. was detained a month, and thence sent to the Island, the 27th September, 1665."

"Nigh four years since, sent out from hence,  
To Exon Gaol was I,  
But special Grace in three months space,  
Wrought out my liberty.  
Till Bartholomew in sixty-two,  
That freedom did remain;  
Then without bail to Exon Gail,  
I hurried was again,  
Where having laid, as do the slain  
'Mong dead men wholly free;  
Full three years' space, my native place,  
By leave I came to see.  
And thought not then, I here again  
A moneth's restraint should find,  
Since to my Den, cast out from men,  
I'm during life design'd.  
But since my lines the Lord assigns  
In such a lot to be,  
I kiss the rod, confess my God  
Deals faithfully with me.  
My chargéd crime, in His due time,  
He fully will decide,  
And until then, forgiving men,  
In peace with Him I bide."

There are other verses that relate to his personal experience. Immediately following these wonderful records of hardship, are lines almost more impressive:

"On the beginning of his recovery from a great sickness,  
on the Island of Plymouth.  
To His truly Sacred Majesty, the High and Mighty Potentate.  
King of kings, and Lord of lords, Prince of Life and

Peace, Heir of all things, and Head over all to the Church.

The humble prostration and thankful acknowledgement of a poor Prisoner of Hope, whose life upon all accounts hath been marvellously preserved, and delivered with a great Salvation from the pit of Corruption."

This really noble poem of thanksgiving and praise should be read by all Free Churchmen, but it is too long for complete insertion, I can only quote a few lines:

"Most glorious Sovereign to thy feet is brought,  
The trembling Offspring of a contrite thought,  
By a poor Captive who attempts to raise,  
An Eben-ezer to his Saviours praise.  
A lasting Pillar as in Conscience bound,  
In due remembrance of choice favours found;  
With Grace to succour in a needful hour,  
From death's dominion, and the Tempter's power."

Great interest also generally attaches to the book on account of its many allusions to his friends and members of his flock. Thus, an "Anagram on John Edwards junior, who died in the Prison at Exon the 27th year of his age." Again, an "Anagram on Mrs. Margaret Trenick, of Plymouth; who departed this life on the 30th day of the second month, 1665." And once more, "A Mourner's Mite, towards the right Remembrance of that Labourer in the Gospel, Thomas Glass, who rested from his work on earth, the 30th day of the 7th month, 1666." Several poems also are addressed to relations of his named Lark, as, "To my Cousin, W. L."; "To my Kinsman, A. L."

But it is time I addressed myself to the main purpose of the book. It is "A Looking-Glass for CHILDREN." Children "writ large." It is not misnamed; a book more sympathetic with child-life, and with a more sincere desire to lead children to Christ is not to be found. A fact of great importance, that has not received the recognition it claims, comes under our notice at this time; viz., the deep and loving interest these early Baptists took in children, and the real and adapted methods they devised to reach them and make them true Christians. Close familiarity with the literature of the time will lead any appreciative reader to this conclusion. I bring before you three authors whose compositions commenced about the period of the Restoration, and they all lay themselves out distinctly to the end of winning the children. It may also be said that their most successful efforts in verse are attained in this particular realm. What could

be better than Cheare's opening lines on "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth."

"Sweet children, Wisdom you invites  
To hearken to her Voice,  
She offers to you rare delights  
Most worthy of your choice.  
Eternal blessings in her wayes,  
You shall be sure to find;  
Oh! therefore in your youthful dayes,  
Your great Creator mind."

Extending, as it does, to fourteen verses, the poem warns against the world, enjoins Scripture precepts and prayer, enforces early piety, and gives notable examples—as Isaac, Samuel, Josiah, and Timothy—and concludes by urging personal consecration in the following feeling and truly poetical lines:

"This Garland, wreath'd of youthful flowers  
To Jesus you would bring:  
This Morn made up of golden Hours,  
You would present the King.  
You'd humbly bow without delays,  
Grace in His sight to find;  
And gladly now, and all your days,  
Your Great Creator mind."

A poem thus headed: "Written to a young Virgin, Anno 1663," is one of the choicest. It has an introduction in verse that is a gem in its way. I select the lines:

"Sweet Child  
When I bethink what need there is of care,  
For precious souls to save themselves from snare:

This song, I thought, you now and then might sing  
If God would follow it, to mind to bring  
Your state by nature and the Gospel Path  
To set you free from everlasting Wrath.  
If, morn by morn, you in this Glass will dress you,  
I have some hopes that God by it may bless you."

It will be noted that the author, in his earnest desire for the salvation of the soul is oblivious to any appeal there may be to vanity on account of physical beauty, as a motive to secure the end proposed.

"When by Spectators I am told,  
     What beauty doth adorn me:  
 Or in a Glass when I behold,  
     How sweetly God did form me.  
 Hath God such comliness display'd  
     And on me made to dwell?  
 'Tis pitty, such a pretty Maid  
     As I, should go to Hell."

This song, as Cheare calls it, is charming all through with human and inconsequent touches. So like a consciously pretty girl placing the pleasures of a worldly life over against those of a grave religiousness. But the sterner side of Puritan theology comes out in the tenth verse, which is the last, in which the "tenders" i.e. offers of "new Cov'nant Grace"—are introduced: and the child is informed that notwithstanding her beauty, she is lost by her sin and must be plucked from the pit:

"Would Christ my Spirit lead along,  
     These tenders to embrace,  
 I should have matter for a Song,  
     To Praise His Glorious Grace.  
 How first of goodness I was seiz'd,  
     From what a state I fell;  
 To what a glory God hath rais'd,  
     A Fire-brand pluckt from Hell."

Popular, undoubtedly, this song became. In my earliest edition of Keach's "Instructions for Children," dated 1691, if I may anticipate for a moment, I find it quoted, with this introductory remark: "Moreover I would have you get that little Book called, 'A Token for Children,' and another called, 'A Looking-Glass for Children.' Next to your Bible, pray read them pretty Books." But he has reduced the song to seven verses.

This little book abounds with expressions of spontaneous affection and artless persuasiveness, quite irresistible. "To my Cousin, T. H., at School," he writes:

"My thoughts to Meeter were inclin'd,  
     As thinking on a Scholar's mind  
 It might at first with fansie take,  
     And after deep impressions make."

"To my Cousin, John H.," he says:

"Sweet John, I send you here,  
     A Song by heart to learn;  
     Not it to say, as Parrets may,  
     But wisely to discern."



Again, "To my Cousin Sam. B.":

"Dear Cousin Sam, my pretty Lamb,  
This Song to you I send;  
Whatever play aside you lay,  
Learn this from end to end."

Such charming little poems were repeatedly written, and all from prison; that the children who received them must have wept with a great yearning to get into the presence of such a loving and earnest well wisher.

Of a different type and scope is "A Description of an Elect Person, in his threefold state, by Nature, Grace, and Glory; Collected by Va. Powel, in the close of his Catechism." But when "translated into familiar verse for children" by Cheare, the resentment generally awakened by the presence of the "elect person" is quite dissipated. This is a long and orderly poem of thirty-five verses. Each verse contains allusions to Nature, Grace, Glory, and Rest in proper sequence. Thus:

"The form of Godliness I loath'd	Nature.
Which Sons of God profess;	
Now with its power compleatly cloathed	Grace.
With all my heart I press.	
The price of that high Call at last,	Glory.
I am in hope to gain.	
Lord! Why should all this Grace be cast	Rest.
Upon a Wretch so vain?"	

It will not be denied by any well instructed and gracious person that we are here brought into contact with a rare spirit, a sweet and saintly soul. Nor will any generous nature, however cultured, deny that this man possessed a real and delightful, if limited, lyrical gift. I shall not be misunderstood when I say that, in direct simplicity and profound mystical suggestion combined, he frequently reminds me of William Blake.

As authors of verse, Cheare and Bunyan were practically contemporaries. But we have seen that one item at least in Cheare's collection was written in 1663—and possibly printed in broadside, as the custom was, at the same date. Bunyan's imprisonment commenced in 1660. His first compositions in verse included "Serious Meditations" upon the "Four Last Things," "Eball and Gerizzim," with "Prison Meditations." These were published in 1664, possibly in separate form. Ofor tells us he had a third edition, dated 1688, which I suppose perished in the fire that destroyed so many volumes of his collection. My

copy is the fourth, so is that also in the British Museum, and none earlier is known to-day.

A further item is one of mystery and romance. In the first record of it, viz., in 1692 it is described by Doe as: "Meditations on seventy-four things." In the bibliographical list of 1698, and by the same compiler, but with more detail, it is set forth as "A Book for Boys and Girls, or Country Rhymes for Children, in Verse, on Seventy-four things. Published 1686. In about six sheets 12mo."

Then followed an edition of 1701, which caused all the perplexity. Here the title was changed to "A Book for Boys and Girls, or Temporal Things Spiritualized." But instead of "seventy-four things" this issue contained only "forty-nine things." This title was again changed by the addition of a new headline, viz., "Divine Emblems." So it remained, including only forty-nine items, sometimes illustrated, sometimes not, through very many editions down to 1890, when Dr. Brown edited "a facsimile edition of the unique first edition" of 1686, which was published by Elliot Stock. No copy evidently had fallen into the hand of any responsible bibliographer through well nigh two hundred years. The copy that ultimately came to light had been in the Stowe collection, the library of the Duke of Buckingham. On the breaking up of that library it became the property of a gentleman in New York for forty guineas; it fell into the hands of Mr. Henry N. Stevens, of Great Russell Street, and is now deposited in the British Museum, from which the reprint was taken. The story of the reduction of the emblems in number is too long to enter upon here; but in all probability some editor, thinking himself wiser than the author, regarded certain emblems as too plain—for some were changed—and other matter was frequently added. Books as well as men pass through strange adventures!

In reading Bunyan's poems the constraint to quote is not overmastering, yet at times the sentiment is so just, and the spirit of the lines so brave, that a moral compulsion is felt when poetic admiration is not deeply stirred. Thus, in "Prison Meditations," there are sentiments equal to Lovelace's well known lines on imprisonment; if lacking his supreme art in expression, they include sources of joy and motives to endurance to which he was a stranger.

" I am (indeed) in Prison (now)  
 In Body, but my Mind  
 Is free to Study Christ, and how  
 Unto me He is kind.

For though men keep my outward man  
 Within their Locks and Bars,  
 Yet by the Faith of Christ I can  
 Mount higher than the Stars.

Their Fetters cannot spirits tame,  
 Nor tye up God from me;  
 My Faith and Hope they cannot lame;  
 Above them I shall be.

I here am very much refresh't  
 To think when I was out  
 I preachéd Life, and Peace, and Rest,  
 To sinners round about.

My business then was Souls to Save,  
 By preaching Grace and Faith,  
 Of which the comfort now I have,  
 And have it shall to death."

Still another book of poems awaits us, entitled "Meditations on the Several Ages of Man's Life: To which is Added Scriptural Poems," i.e., on Ruth, Sampson, Christ, Sermon on the Mount, Jonah, Joseph, and the Epistle of James. Licensed according to Order. London: Printed for J. Blare, at the Looking Glass on London Bridge, 1701." There is reason to believe the book has not been reprinted; it certainly escaped the notice of the early editors, but I am fortunate in owning a copy and knowing the location of a second. There are seven emblems of the seven traditional ages, with a verse under each; but the main part of the work is in prose. This section has been regarded as an imposture, and it certainly was issued by the publisher who put out the third part of the Pilgrim's Progress. The Scriptural Poems, however, are regarded as genuine, and internal evidence looks in this direction. The address to the reader in verse is unusually interesting. I can only insert a few lines:

"Nor could'st thou hope to have it better done:  
 For I am no Poet, nor a Poet's Son,  
 But a Mechanick, guided by no rule,  
 But what I gainéd in a Grammar School."

He then expresses a wish that men of poetic genius would versify the Scriptures, and concludes with a delightful reference from our greatest devotional poet:

“ If what the Learned Herbert says, holds true,  
 A verse may find him, whom a sermon flies,  
 And turn delight into a sacrifice;  
 Thus I conclude, and wish it as delighting  
 To thee in reading as to me in writing.”

For the rest, we are all acquainted with the introductions and verses scattered up and down the Pilgrim and the Holy War. My favourite of all the descriptive poems is the Epilogue to the Holy War, in which the author makes good his claim to have originated the whole of the Pilgrim. He answers the charge: “ Some say the ‘ Pilgrim’s Progress ’ is not mine,” but declares: “—the whole, and every whit, is mine.” Then finally reaches his quaint ending:

“ Witness my name, if anagram’d to thee,  
 The letters make NU HONEY IN A B.”

Perhaps my readers will forgive a minute reference of interest. Do we not find an echo of one of Cheare’s double anagrams here? It is on CALEB VERNON, and is most ingenious:

“ Through Adam’s nature I UNCLEAN was BORE,  
 Through grace (betime) Christ’s NUE CLEAN ROBE I wore.”

In this instance, surely, Cheare provided a hint.

Dr. H. S. Burrage classes Bunyan with our hymn writers, and we do not grudge him his place; but the efforts on which he bases his claim are slight, viz., Mercy’s hymn, and the shepherd boy’s song, both from the second part of the Pilgrim. Respectively: “ Let the Most Blesséd be my Guide”; “ He that is down needs fear no fall.” Andrew Lang, however, has done justice to Bunyan as a British poet by including his verses on a Pilgrim in his distinguished anthology called “ The Blue Poetry Book.” The words are familiar:

“ Who would true valour see,  
 Let him come hither:  
 One here will constant be,  
 Come wind, come weather.  
 There’s no discouragement  
 Shall make him once relent,  
 His first avow’d intent  
 To be a pilgrim.”

Whether Keach’s voluminous productions of versified Puritanic theology and Baptist sentiment created his constituency, or that his readers had a hunger for rhymed religion, one

can scarcely determine; possibly something of both. But, however this may have been, one thing is certain: his books of verses had a great vogue. They ran through many editions in the seventeenth century, and continued popular well on to the end of the eighteenth century. In the Chap-book form, illustrated with crude but quaint woodcuts, bound either in sheep or buckram, and sold by hawkers from door to door, or at country fairs, their circulation was enormous. These books made religion, as was said of our early versions of the English Bible, "to be understood of the common people." They were handy, could be carried in the pocket, and the rhymes gave a piquancy to truth. The explanation of this popularity is an open secret to a sympathetic student. Keach's influence depended upon no literary skill; he was sound, sincere, and pungent. And this combination proved to be sufficient. And no wonder; we should wonder more if he had failed.

Keach entered the lists of authorship at quite an early age. His "Childs' Instructor, or a new and Easy Primer," was published, as we have seen, as early as 1664. It was so successfully destroyed that every copy of the first issue seems to have disappeared. Subsequently, however, in London, he reproduced it; but for this effort he had to depend upon his memory, for he could secure no copy of the first issue, though he sought diligently. For its reproduction he was fined £20. No more useful book for a child can be conceived of. It is educational; containing the alphabet, instructions in spelling and composition, lists of numerals and exercises in arithmetic, religious injunctions, verses and hymns; with an eulogistic preface by "Hansard Knowles." Altogether, a book calculated to make a studious child's heart leap for joy.

Notwithstanding the fiery baptism of his first literary effort, Keach lost none of his impassioned enthusiasm as a propagandist of Baptist doctrines and practices. Publications, however, for a few years ceased, though his tongue and pen were both busy. He is reputed to have published in 1670 a tribute of verse to the memory of his first wife, though no copy is known. By 1673 "War with the Devil: Or, the Young Man's Conflict with the Powers of Darkness," was advertised for sale, the earliest copy known being 1676. Like some other Baptist preachers, John Bunyan for instance, he came into resentful contact with the Quakers, and in 1675 published "The Grand Imposter Discovered: Or, The Quaker Doctrine weighed in the Ballance and found wanting." After an elegy on John Norcot next year, there came in 1679 what some regard as his most successful effort in

verse: "The Glorious Lover: A Divine Poem upon the Adorable Mystery of Sinners' Redemption." In 1681 he published "Sion in Distress," a wail at persecution, which he balanced in 1689 with "Distressed Sion Relieved." All these in verse, beside many brief productions scattered up and down, in his "Key to Open Scripture Metaphors," that enormous folio, consulted by Scripture students even down to the present day; also in other writings.

It was not, however, merely in the department of religious and devotional verse Keach achieved his fame; but as an advocate of singing in religious services, and as a composer of hymns, he left the deepest impression upon his own times. I have not at any time raised Keach to the dignity of a Christian poet; and the distinction between poetry and hymns is a commonplace. We love to have these elements combined if possible; but a hymn may admirably accomplish its purpose with the almost complete absence of poetry. This gradation we need not discuss.

Although on the Continent the Anabaptists were remarkable for their hymns, yet in England a disuse of singing in many Baptist meetings had been brought about by various causes during the seventeenth century. In times of fierce persecution the sound of praise had occasionally betrayed the place of private meetings. Thus caution by frequent repetition might easily crystallize into a confirmed resentment against that which exposed to disturbance and imprisonment. Again, a decided hatred of the formal usages of the dominant church threw them out of sympathy with music, even vocal; they complained "'Tis as bad as Common Prayer." Further, another party made a distinction between psalms and paraphrases of psalms, and hymns of modern composition—the first were Scriptural and allowable, the second to be prohibited. And finally the culminating offence seems to have been the singing of a sacred hymn by a mixed congregation, viz., by non-members who remained to witness the observance of the Lord's Supper without themselves partaking of the elements. With patience, prudence, and Christian love, Keach for years combatted these objections, and stood resolutely for hymns of modern composition and praise in the mixed congregation. He emerged from the fray with the loss of some of his church members; but the issue was the gladdening of the congregation with the jubilant song and the hallelujah of praise.

As early as 1675, in "War with the Devil," Keach had essayed a small collection of "hymns and spiritual songs," containing, amongst others, "A Mystical Hymn of Thanksgiving." It has the verse:

“ My soul mounts up with Eagle’s wings,  
 And unto Thee, dear God, she sings;  
 Since Thou art on my side,  
 My enemies are forc’d to fly  
 As soon as they do Thee espy;  
 Thy name be glorifi’d.”

“ Divine Breathings ” is comprehensive in scope and inclusive of strange rhymes, and does not abjure maledictions. Thus:

“ Let Grace and Knowledge now abound,  
 And the blest Gospel shine so clear,  
 That it Rome’s Harlot may Confound,  
 And Popish darkness quite cashier;  
 O let Thy face on Sion shine,  
 But plague these cursed foes of Thine.  
 Nay, precious God, let Light extend  
 To China and East India;  
 To Thee let all the people bend,  
 Who live in wild America;  
 O let Thy blessed Gospel shine  
 That the blind Heathen may be Thine.  
 Send forth Thy Light like to the morn  
 Most swiftly Lord, O let it fly  
 From Cancer unto Capricorn;  
 That all dark nations may espy  
 Thy glorious Face on them to shine,  
 And they in Christ for to be Thine.”

This intrepid champion of singing has made good his claim to the gratitude of Baptists of all time. Two books set forth his courage and his rhyming ability. These were both published in 1691. “ The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship: Or, Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ,” tells the story of the fiery conflict. He affirmed that there is no “ more reason against compiling sacred hymns to be sung out of the Word of Christ than there is to object against pre-compiled sermons.” Having fought this battle in the interest of praise, he felt it incumbent upon him to provide hymns for the sanctuary. Thus he promptly published his “ Spiritual Melody, containing near Three Hundred Sacred Hymns.” Both works are scarce, the “ Spiritual Melody ” being absolutely rare. The book has the distinction of being the really first Baptist Hymnal. A fair illustration of the kind of hymn it contains is the following:

“ O Virgins know, both Fools and Wise,  
 The Bridegroom is at hand:  
 He comes, He comes, let it suffice,  
 But who with Him shall stand?

Cast off your drowze, let's all awake,  
 'Tis not a time to slumber:  
 But speedily our Lamps let's take  
 And haste to the Wedding-Chamber:  
 For certainly our dearest Lord  
 Will quickly come away;  
 The mid-night cry will soon be heard—  
 His chariots will not stay.”

Out of this “near three hundred hymns,” few have survived. Indeed, a modern authority affirms that “none of them are now in use.” Nevertheless, many sacred poets and hymn-writers have not filled so large a space in the devotional and praise service of men as our author.

Mr. Spurgeon's estimate of Keach's poetry is decidedly frank and not flattering: “As for the poetry of Keach's works, the less said the better. It is a rigmarole almost equal to John Bunyan's rhyming, but hardly up even to the mark of honest John.”

From this brief review it will appear that both the defence and spread of Baptist principles, in the earliest times in England, were greatly aided by these writings in verse. Further, they enshrine and perpetuate records of persecution bravely born in the cause of religion. For an alternative title of this paper might have been “Baptist Prison Poems.” Again the title might be varied, and with equal fitness phrased as “Divine Poems and Songs for Children and Young People.” Their great aim was to gather into the fold of the Church, and to guard from the power of an evil world, the youth of the nation. And whatever the critical estimate of succeeding generations may be with regard to literary grace and poetical power in these productions (and we cannot expect it to rise) it is certain that the verdict upon the saintliness and heroism of these men cannot decline. They were not bards, but fervent preachers. They did not even produce the “polished line,” but they suffered for the truth. We do not covet authority to canonize men as saints, but these of whom we speak needed no papal patent to prove them followers of the Lamb. Our Free Churches must recognise them as apostles of freedom, and they must be venerated evermore as the early fathers of our beloved English Baptist churches.

JOHN C. FOSTER.