



“Exalted Manna”: The Psalms as Literature

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I. THE PSALTER'S MATTER AND MANNER

“The book is praise, the parts are prayer,” says poet and preacher John Donne of the psalter. “The name changes not the nature; Prayer and Praise is the same thing.” Milton's Christ in the epic *Paradise Regained* calls the “Songs of Sion” the hymns

...where God is praised aright, and Godlike men,
The Holiest of Holies, and his Saints.

The 150 psalms which comprise the Book of Praise vary in literary type, in mood and tone, in purpose, and in persona. There are lyrics of lament and lyrics of praise; there are odes and occasional verse celebrating a royal wedding, military victory, a coronation; there are elegies such as the compelling “By the waters of Babylon”; there are the festival and ritual songs; there are the didactic Wisdom psalms. Sometimes the persona is clearly an individual. More often the persona is Israel or a spokesman for Israel. But every reader of the psalter recognizes immediately two things: the *matter* of the psalms is God. He is present everywhere—in the dark, in the light, before the worlds were made, in the action of history, and from everlasting to everlasting. The *manner* of the psalms is energy, in the shouts of joy and in the groans from the abyss. God in the psalms who is addressed, described, searched for, or revealed is real; real too the human voices which call upon him.

For the Christian reader, the living God of the psalms is God who has broken the bonds of death for his children. But the praise-singers in the psalms have no sense of personal immortality. “Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily man at his best state is altogether vanity.” “What profit is there in my blood when I go down to the pit? Shall the dust praise thee? shall it declare thy truth?” Yet this recognition does not lead to despair. The prayer and the praise are rooted in the conviction that life, whether more or less than three-score years and ten, is life only when

lived with God. It is God who gives human life its definition, its shape and quality. For the Greek poet Homer, “man plows the earth and perishes.” For the psalmists, man is God's creation; man's work is blessed by God; man's prayers are a testimony for generations to come of the faithfulness of God. Without offering any hope of resurrection from the grave, the hymns and prayers have an assurance about them: God is life and to live is to love and fear God.

The psalmists' understanding of what man is, is eloquently presented in Psalm 8: “O

Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” The question addressed in the psalm is ages old: What is man? The frame for the poem’s development is God, so the apostrophe which opens the song closes it as well, just as the worshipper’s life is framed. Man is “a little lower than the angels,” he has “dominion over” God’s created works. But this is not his doing. It is God who has made him and given him his rank in the scheme of things. The Greek dramatist Sophocles explores the same question in his tragedy *Antigone*. The comparison illuminates. The chorus in its opening ode declaims:

Numberless are the world’s wonders,
but none More wonderful than man.

Man tames the sea, he farms the earth, he tames the bird, beast, and fish “in the net of his mind.” Only death defeats him. Sophocles’ magnificent ode with its humanistic core carries a note of irony. Without the theocentric vision of the psalmist, man’s portrait is diminished.

A perception of this ironic contrast burns through Christopher Marlowe’s tragedy of Renaissance man, *Doctor Faustus*. Faustus, straining every sinew to break the chain of being which places him below God, sells his soul to Lucifer for super-human powers. Having signed his blood-pact with hell, he looks up into the star-studded sky and quotes a fragment from Psalm 8: “When I behold the heavens’ then I repent.” What is man when the heavens are empty of God?

Nowhere in the psalms are the heavens emptied of God. God may appear to have deserted his people, he may have sold them at a loss, he may seem deaf to cries of anguish, even to have broken his Covenant. But God is not dead. Never do the psalms suggest ennui or apathy; almost every psalm could end with the refrain: “The zeal of thy house has eaten me up.” In this context two psalms are of particular interest. Both find a promised land turned into wasteland. Psalm 137 depicts Israel and the individual poet in exile. With the holy city treacherously razed and Israel captive in Babylon, there are no songs to sing; the harps have been hung on the weeping willows. But the memories of Zion are indelibly engraved and when the poet’s tongue cannot sing with joy, the smothered song turns into savage curse. The psalm is a strange mixture of sophisticated, elegiac dignity and primitive rage. It holds the best and the worst of human nature. But it does not whine; it has no enervating sentimentality. God is called upon as avenger, destroyer of those who destroy. There is no doubt that God will act.

What seems the most despairing lament in the psalter is Psalm 88. Its setting is the dark night of the soul. The poet’s entire life has been lived in the valley of death; now, afflicted with a disease so loathsome that he walks free

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only among the dead, he has nothing, no one to offer companionship or comfort. What he has is only God and his God is hidden from him, revealed only in the punishing aspects of the poet’s sickness. Morning and night he cries to God who has no time to listen. His world is the blackness of the abyss, the dark at the bottom of the sea. The poem ends:

Thou hast caused lover and friend to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.

Such a poem hardly belongs, one thinks, in the Book of Praise. But because it is a poem, its poetic form has already put some order into the chaos of bitter experience. The voice is tragic but is lifted out of despair, for despair knows no creative energy; it paralyzes.

Dost thou work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise thee?
Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave, or thy faithfulness in Abaddon?
Are thy wonders known in the darkness?

The poem itself answers: Yes. The appalling and bitter experience of one human being who cries from the depths meets through the centuries the loneliness of others, meets, recognizes, shares, and moves toward benediction.

II. THE PSALMS: THE BIBLE'S THESAURUS

A book of poems, the psalter may be studied as an anthology. But it is also a part of a larger work, the Bible as a whole. In spite of its size, its chronological span, its diversity, the Bible in Christian tradition has been read as a single work. As Northrop Frye points out, "It begins where time begins, with the creation of the world; it ends where time ends, with the Apocalypse, and it surveys human history in between..."¹ The parts of its revelation may be noted as "creation, exodus, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse."² Where does the psalter fit among these categories? It is possible, I think, to see it as the little treasury of them all.

Of the many psalms which praise the creation by the Word, the breath of God, none is more joyous than Psalm 104. The poet goes beyond the traditional myth of God's defeat of the dragon chaos. In this poem the whole order of creation—all living things, all creatures great and small—celebrates its life and place. The predatory beasts of the forest roam and roar at night, but man is safe: he works the day-shift. The watered "trees of the Lord" make homes for the singing birds and, since the psalm delights in specific detail, for the stork as well. The refreshed earth offers man refreshment—"wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart." And Creator God laughs too: "...there is that Leviathan which you have made for the sport of it." No wonder the psalm opens and closes with "Bless the Lord, O my soul!"

¹Northrup Frye, *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) xiii.

²*Ibid.*, xxii.

The radiance of this picture of the created world appears also in the pictures of the New Jerusalem, those which form part of the vision of the apocalypse. "God is gone up with a shout," cries the poet of Psalm 47. "Glorious things of thee are spoken, O city of God," and the musicians, the dancers, the singers know the source of their inspiration in that new city which has open gates to all the world: "Of Zion it shall be said, 'Everyone was born in her....'" Where the creation hymns fittingly explore and heap up images from nature, the apocalypse hymns draw largely upon images of the city. The pulsing excitement of the pilgrim song "How Lovely are Thy Dwellings," where the poet sees Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon, continues to beat in the imagination even after temple and city have been destroyed. And the dream, the determined

hope, of a new Zion stirs again the poetic impulse: “All my fresh springs are in you,” the poet of Psalm 87 sings. The picture of that city to come testifies to the poet’s forward-looking joy: “There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God...God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.” More baroque but not more connotatively rich is the fuller description in Revelation.

Where “history” for Israel begins is, of course, the Exodus, the miracles of the departure from Egypt, the revelation of Yahweh from Sinai, the wanderings in the wasteland, and the taking of the promised land. It is urgent that the children of Israel rehearse this history, remember God’s Covenant, and instruct the generations to come in that heritage. It is hardly surprising then that so many psalms are concerned to repeat the history. Sometimes the rehearsal is used to rebuke Israel for forgetfulness; sometimes to lament the contrast between present misery and past promise. But often the history is recited just to praise God. The verses of Psalm 114, for example, suggest that Exodus was, in itself, a “new creation.” An old order is shaken and from that chaos, a new order emerges.

When Israel went forth from Egypt,...
The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.
What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?
O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills like lambs?

Here the repetitions and rhetorical questions are gleeful. The ancient mountains and hills, once awesome homes for the gods³, lose their formidable aspect and dance before a greater power, the presence of the God of Jacob.

In Psalm 81, law and prophecy join. In this song for a feast-day, the poet reports a mystical experience: “I hear a voice I had not known.” What follows is God speaking through the poet, admonishing the people. God’s voice utters again the first two commandments given on Sinai, laments the waywardness of the people of the Covenant, and closes the revelation with love and longing:

‘O that my people would listen to me...
I would feed you with the finest of the wheat and with honey from the rock
I would satisfy you.’

³Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 264.

That satisfaction, sweet as honey, is felt throughout the Psalter in the songs which praise the law. “How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth”; “Thy statutes have been my songs”; “The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces”; “With open mouth I pant, because I long for thy commandments” (Ps 119). No psalm more perfectly recreates the poet’s delight in the law than Psalm 19. C. S. Lewis, in his brilliant analysis of the poem, calls it “one of the greatest lyrics in the world.”⁴ If the Hebrew suggests that originally the poem was two different psalms, the single poem as we have it in translation today works as a unity. The first part of the lyric, “The heavens are telling the glory of God,”

celebrates nature, God's creation, vividly picturing the sun which "comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy." Nothing is "hid from its heat." Without transition, the poet moves to a celebration of the "law of the Lord." But, Lewis notes, the poet is hardly aware that he is speaking of something else, for the law, like the sun, is "undefiled,' the Law gives light, it is clean and everlasting, it is 'sweet.' No one can improve on this and nothing can more fully admit us to the old Jewish feeling about the Law: luminous, severe, disinfecant, exultant."⁵ The image of the sun gives color to the whole lyric, for the "ordinances of the Lord" are praised above "fine gold," and sweeter to the taste than "drippings from the honeycomb."

Wisdom literature, too, finds a comfortable place in the Psalter. Psalm 37 is a mosaic of proverbs, as is Psalm 119. When the didactic tone of this literary type is modified to more lyric purposes, as in Psalm 1, the effect delights. The structure of the first psalm is contrast, the "way of the righteous" with the "way of the wicked." The beatitude which opens the poem contrasts the condemnation of the ending. The stance of the righteous man, meditating earnestly on "the law of the Lord," contrasts the stance of the wicked, who "sits in the seat of the scornful." The image of the righteous man as a fruitful tree "planted by streams of water," contrasts the image of the wicked as "chaff which the wind drives away." The image *is* the argument, leading to the "therefore" conclusion.

But perhaps of primary interest to the Christian reader of the Psalter are the preparations it makes for the gospel. Psalms 22 and 69 because of their influence on New Testament accounts of the Passion story are especially sacred. But it is rewarding too to notice how recurrent images in the Psalms take on new and vital energy as they appear in the gospels.

God in the Psalter is shepherd, gardener, farmer; he is king, champion warrior, righteous judge; he is loving parent, teacher, physician, and generous, welcoming host. God is the Word, rock and fortress, sheltering wing, light, water, bread. All of these images reappear in the gospels, often no longer as image but image become reality: Word made Flesh.

"The Lord is my shepherd," the most familiar of all the psalms begins. Psalm 119 prays God to find the sheep who has gone astray. "I am the good shepherd," says Christ. "I lay down my life for the sheep." The Shepherd of the psalms guides, nourishes, cherishes, loves. The Shepherd of the gospels

⁴C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1958) 63.

⁵*Ibid.*, 64.

becomes himself a sheep. "Thou hast made us like sheep for the slaughter," is the anguished lament of the poet in Psalm 44. Christ is the sacrificial Lamb.

God, says the poet in Psalm 80, brought a vine out of Egypt, planted it so that it took deep roots, and "the hills were covered with the shadow of it." But, laments the psalmist, now the vine is broken, torn by wild boar, burned with fire. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman," says Christ.

God as king, whose throne is "forever and ever," whose "scepter is a right scepter," is omnipresent in the Book of Praise, and never more royal than in the ceremonial processional hymn, Psalm 24.

Who is the King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
The Lord, mighty in battle!

Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.

But a terrifying, awful contrast comes in the Palm Sunday processional of the gospels. Here the king is the suffering servant, the humiliated one. He rides on a donkey; the ancient doors are shut in his face. The Lord “mighty in battle” sweats blood, hangs naked on cross with two criminals as his court. “How lovely are thy dwellings” becomes an ironic, tragic apostrophe. But the champion warrior picture emerges: the resurrected Jesus of St. Paul’s faith. “If God be for us, who can be against us?”

The warm, intimate, loving personification of God in the Psalms as healer, teacher, parent, and generous host have electric connections with the life of Christ, his own sermons and parables. Parental images of God abound in the Psalms. That he is the father of the children of Israel lies at the core of the Covenant. For individual psalmists the relationship is intensified: “Keep me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of thy wings,” is the childlike longing of the poet in Psalm 17. God is “mother” for the poet of Psalm 131. “...I have... quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother; my soul is even as a weaned child.” Weiser notes the significance of this translation.⁶ The speaker is not like the infant whose mother is merely the source of satisfaction for his own greedy desire. The weaned child recognizes the comforting “Other.” The temple of God in the Psalms is “home” for the praise-singers. There are the wings which shelter. Even the nesting sparrow and swallow can find their place in the altar of God.

Poignantly in the gospels these parental images are renewed. Unlike the sparrow and swallow of the Psalms, Christ has nowhere to rest his head, yet he offers himself as maternal comfort for human kind: “How often would I have gathered thy children together even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings,” he mourns over Jerusalem. God, he teaches in his prayer, is “Our Father”; and he promises his disciples a home to come to: “In my father’s house are many mansions....I go to prepare a place for you.”

⁶Weiser, *The Psalms*, 777.

The welcome-home picture of God as parent receives an extension in the personification of God as host. Here God’s child becomes God’s guest. In Psalm 36 the “children of men” feast “on the abundance of thy house, and thou givest them drink from the river of thy delights.” In Psalm 23 the Lord as host both feasts and honors his guest:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

The gospels give new meaning to this image: the Eucharist. God is host at his table and he is also servant. He offers bread and wine which are himself. For Psalm 23 this new meaning transforms

what is otherwise to the Christian reader a troublesome picture. The gloating satisfaction of dining well while one's enemies look hungrily on belongs to a world code which Christianity does not accept. But now one's "enemies" become the shadows of the valley of death: all one's deadly sins. The fear of death fades in the God-present comfort of the feast of love.

Throughout the history of literature the picture of the banqueting table where the guest, quite disarmed, sits down to dine festively has been the setting for treachery and revenge: the host offers the poisoned meat and drink, the other guests rise to attack. In Psalm 23 the diner is safe. In the gospels all the sheep are fed; there are loaves and fishes for a multitude; even the outcasts from the highways and byways are welcome.

God is also physician, healer, in the Psalms. In the penitential Psalm 51 the speaker cries out to be purged, washed, and cleansed:

Create in me a clean heart, a God,
and put a new and right spirit within me....

Christ's conversation with Nicodemus suggests a whole new self—a new birth. When in Psalm 30 the speaker rejoices that God has heard his appeal for help and has healed him, he uses the memorable lines:

Weeping may tarry for the night
but joy comes in the morning.

The gospels infinitely enrich the verse, for Christ is the real morning, the light, the day-star. The gospels indeed "sing to the Lord a new song."

III. THE PSALMS AND THE CHRISTIAN POET

To consider the Psalms as literature is, inevitably, to examine their influence on other literature. More profound than the psalmists' debt to Canaanite, Egyptian, and Babylonian poetry is the debt the literature of the western world owes to the Psalms. Through the centuries they have been, in the imagery of the Psalms themselves, a well-spring, a fountain of bright water to poets, dramatists, writers of fiction, and essayists, in literature both sacred and profane. Even if one considers only English literature the extent and intensity of that influence is impossible to measure. The antiphonal psalms chanted in the medieval church,

for example, parented English drama, and drama from medieval times to our own century has borrowed lavishly from the language of the English Psalter. Major and minor poets from Chaucer on have made their own metrical translations of psalms to stand alone or to be incorporated in other poems. Images and themes from the Psalter have inspired the modern novel, as Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove* admirably shows. But if full examination of the influence of the Psalms on our literature is impossible, it is possible to isolate a single poet and suggest what, just for one writer, the Psalms have meant. Clouds of witness from our English heritage rise up to testify, but one voice sings clear: the seventeenth century priest and poet, George Herbert. Drawing deeply from the well of the Psalms, he offers that living water from a cup of his own

Fine nets and strategems to catch us in,
Bibles laid open, millions of surprises,
Blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness,
The sound of glory ringing in our ears. ("Sin 1")

For the psalmists as for Herbert, God made man lord over all created things: "Thou hast put all things under his feet" (Ps 8). Herbert says the same:

What house more stately hath there been,
Or can be, than is Man? to whose creation
All things are in decay. ("Man")

They draw the same conclusion from this: "that, as the world serves us, we may serve thee, and both thy servants be."

But man is also "fallen." Herbert calls man "clay that weeps," "Thy Dust that calls." Man's whole life is "one undressing, a steady aiming at the tomb." In the psalms of lament this picture is used to urge God to raise the speaker from the pit, to heal his broken bones, to wash his diseased self. For, runs the argument, the dust cannot praise God.

Herbert, with his Easter-faith, has another vision.

Come, Lord, my head doth burn, my heart is sick
While thou dost ever, ever stay;
Thy long deferrings wound me to the quick,
My spirit gaspeth night and day.
O shew thy self to me....("Home")

Up to this point in the poem Herbert follows the thought pattern of the lament psalm. But with line 6 a breath-taking turn occurs:

Or take me up to thee.
...
O loose this frame, this knot of man untie!
That my free soul may use her wing
Which now is pinion'd with mortality,
As an intangled, hamper'd thing.

Drawing deeply in two poems from Psalm 51, Herbert interprets the plea: "Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow," "Create in me a clean heart" as

answered in the Eucharist. The psalmist's "Let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice" becomes in Herbert:

But thou wilt sin and grief destroy;

That so the broken bones may joy,
And tune together in a well-set song
Full of his praises
Who dead men raises.
Fractures well cur'd make us more strong. ("Repentance")

As in the Psalter, *The Temple* reveals the poet's delight in studying God's law, in meditating, in praying, and in praising. These activities feast the soul. God's Word is sweet to the soul's taste: "...let my heart suck every letter and a honey gain" ("The H. Scriptures 1"); prayer is "the church's banquet," "exalted manna" ("Prayer"). God's law mellows "the ground with showers and frosts, love and awe" ("Vanity 1") Like the psalmist of Psalm 73, Herbert cries; "It is good for me to hold me fast by God" ("The Holdfast"). Meditation is a perfume for the mind, a "broth of smells, that feeds and fats" the mind ("The Odour").

But best of all in the Psalms and in the Christian poet is praising, looking at the world God has made, worshipping in the House of the Lord. The five "Hallelujah" songs which bring the Psalter to its glorious, symphonic conclusion have their echoes in Herbert, but his poems of praise are quieter, more personal. (Only, perhaps, in the poems of the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins are the Hallel songs rivaled.) Herbert's praise cannot forget for a moment that the "King of Glory, King of Peace" is also the Crucified One. His book of praise does not end with the music of the spheres and the united chorus of all creation. It ends with the moving parable "Love." The setting is a table prepared for an unworthy guest who knows he is unworthy. But Love invites, provides the fare, and serves the guest.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat.
So I did sit and eat.

Herbert had promised his God:

...with my utmost art
I will sing thee.
And the cream of all my heart
I will bring thee. ("Praise 2")

Well, of course. For man's uniqueness, as Herbert defines it in his metaphysical recreation of Psalm 104, is that only to man did God make "known his ways." He

...put the pen alone into his hand
And made him Secretary of thy praise. ("Providence")

The psalmists would surely agree.