

## CHAPTER 4



# Psalms as Poetry

WE SHOULD REMEMBER the psalms are and were, in their initial compositions, poems—with the entirety of the Psalter (all one hundred and fifty of them) being merely a congeries of individual poems or simply a volume of verse. Of course, these psalms have been used extensively in liturgical practices, but they are still poems. Many of them are often highly cherished not only among those who regularly read and sing them in worship services, but also by the general public and non-religious folk as well. In the words of the British writer C. S. Lewis,

Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licences and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.<sup>1</sup>

Many people who do not darken the door of a house of worship can often recite substantial portions of individual psalms, reflecting their poetic, literary value outside of liturgical use.

The one hundred and fifty poems constituting the Psalter have engendered admiration, emulation, and enduring precedent for a long line of English and American poets. Like so many of those

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1. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 3.

poets before and after him, W. H. Auden regarded the psalms as a special body of memorable poetry. Aligned with Auden's predilection to honor these pieces as poems, it is obvious that we should see the Psalter itself as an entire body of poetry. In fact, one could argue convincingly that the Psalter has been the most influential body or book of poems in the Western world. Certainly, the beauty, eloquence, and the literary devices of parallelism, rhetoric, imagery, cadence, and hyperbole, among others, captured in the psalms and broadly disseminated throughout the Judeo-Christian consciousness have constantly stood at the shoulders of Western poets. It seems to me that to characterize the psalms "pre-literary," as some have, meaning their existence preceded literature, while, at the same time, admitting to their eminent influence on poetry over three millennia, borders on the self-contradictory. While the form of the psalms evolved through our language into different applications, their original construction influenced the direction of our own verse. For example, though the ancient Hebrew ear apparently relished more truncated lines and fewer cadences, the English-American ear, as a general matter, extrapolated verse structure into longer lines and more cadences. There are no dominant metrical patterns in the Psalter contained in the Book of Common Prayer; the lines are of varying length with varying numbers of syllables and a variety of rhythms. It should be emphasized that the poetry lines in the retranslated psalms that now appear in the Episcopal prayer book correspond to Hebrew verse, which is not based on meter or rhyme, but on symmetry of form and impression, and often on parallelism of clauses, as illustrated in Psalm 93:4:

The waters have lifted up, O LORD;  
the waters have lifted up their voice;  
the waters have lifted up their pounding waves.

Or by contrast, as in Psalm 1:6:

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

Or by extension of concept, as in Psalm 123:3:

So our eyes look to the LORD our God,  
until he show us his mercy.<sup>2</sup>

As described elsewhere herein, the drafting committee decided to print the psalms as poetry, rather than as prose, which had frequently been done in previous prayer books. In this fashion, a couplet became the normal verse for the psalms, although triplets and quatrains appear now and then—the quatrains being mostly the combination of two couplets.

Notwithstanding many other adaptations, including major adjustments to subject matter and tone, the model of the psalms has persisted to effect a stylistic reference point among English and American writers of verse—in innumerable cases, no doubt, without the literary practitioner's conscious knowledge of the association.

Modern scholarship has advised that the first psalms, which eventually developed into a compendium of ancient religious poetry, began to be written around 1000 BCE, soon after David, the legendary warrior-leader-poet, forged Israel into a formidable theocracy. Scholars generally agree that the composition of the psalms then continued through the period that followed the rebuilding of the second temple in Jerusalem and ended sometime around or possibly even after 500 BCE. When the Hebrews returned from the Babylonian exile around 535 BCE, they renewed a commitment to the faith of their ancestors by taking a series of redemptive steps, including the codification of a worship book of psalms. So, we poets today reach back through three millennia to establish a connection with some early architects and engineers of our craft.

English and American poets have often focused their talents on adaptation of the psalms by having them become metrical and rhythmic for the English language, by using them for launching

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2. Charles M. Guilbert, *The Psalter: A New Version for Public Worship and Private Devotion* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), viii–ix.

related or derived insights, by imposing on them personal and stylistic characteristics and devices, or by retranslating them so the poems comport with up-to-date Hebrew scholarship. George Herbert's translation of Psalm 23, John Donne's poem upon the translation of the psalms by Philip and Mary Sidney, and the Sidneys' own psalm adaptations stand as examples of certain of these literary manifestations. Robert Burns, John Milton, Samuel Coleridge, and Francis Bacon also occasionally found ways to draw on the psalms. More recently, American poets who have reached back to those ancient poems for their own purposes include Daniel Berrigan, Robert Pinsky, Kathleen Norris, William Stafford, and Anthony Hecht. In fact, a psalm, such as 137, resembles the combination of brevity, situational setting, and thematic conveyance of many current postmodern American and English poems. The psalms often lend themselves to the contemporaneous and spontaneous, to the commonplace; as the American poet and writer Kathleen Norris has expressed the concept, ". . . the Psalms are blessedly untidy."<sup>3</sup> Or, as the martyr, renowned twentieth-century theologian, and sometime-poet Dietrich Bonhoeffer voiced, they "mirror life with all its ups and downs, its passions, and discouragements."<sup>4</sup>

The psalms have even helped allay literary feuds. For instance, in the 1950s both T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis, titans in the world of letters who disagreed on a great variety of subjects, were asked by the Church of England to serve on the Psalter Revision Commission for the retranslation of the psalms. Yet once Eliot and Lewis began to work on the psalms, the previously held antagonisms started to evaporate. According to writer Roger Kojecky:

Their first meeting started inauspiciously with Eliot telling Lewis, ten years his junior, that he looked older than [he] appeared in his photos. Lewis had for years disliked Eliot's poetry and criticism ("a very great evil" he called it in a 1935

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3. Kathleen Norris, *The Psalms* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), viii.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 147. Courtesy of Augsburg Fortress Publishers.

letter to Paul Elmer More), but somehow in the context of Psalter Revision Eliot must have won him over, since Lewis wrote afterwards that seeing him, he “loved him.” In their exchanges of letters “Dear Mr Eliot” became “My dear Eliot.”<sup>5</sup>

The ancient poems had broken through the borders of two well-organized and well-fortified states, or, as awakened by the words of Psalm 147, they could have said to each other they now saw “peace on your borders.”<sup>6</sup>

Why do the psalms fascinate poets of every age? It may be as simple as the words of one poet who said a few years ago, meaning to be only half-facetious: “Poetry hasn’t improved much since the psalms.” Professor J. R. R. Tolkien of *The Hobbit* fame viewed the powers of oral tradition and poetry so favorably that he seemed to suggest in his work that the worst thing ever to happen to poetry was the printing press. One can infer from this attitude that poetry in the oral tradition, in which the psalms were initially enjoyed, had to be, by their very nature, like a conversation: immediate, attractive, intense, emotional, and very personal. Or, as similarly related through the words of Psalm 48, “As we have heard, so have we seen.”<sup>7</sup>

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5. Roger Kojecky, book review article: Barry Spurr, ‘Anglo-Catholic in Religion’: T. S. Eliot and Christianity, *The Glass*, Number 23, Spring 2011.

6. The Book of Common Prayer (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 805.

7. *Ibid.*, 651.