

Reupholstered Psalms

Ancient Songs Sung New

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 TWENTY-THIRD
PUBLICATIONS


NOVALIS

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Introduction

If you are looking for a particular, raw, emotive response to reality and can't find it in the ancient psalms of the Hebrew Bible, then you probably won't find it anywhere. The psalter—that long-established collection of 150 poetic pieces of divinely aimed straight-talk—is a clearing house of emotions arising from all manner of collisions with and celebrations of the human condition, tied inextricably, so claim the Scriptures, to the image of God. Everything you want (and also would rather avoid) is there: love, hatred, awe, disgust, fear, trust, courage, cowardice, obedience, rebellion, hope, despair, joy, contempt, comfort, challenge, incomprehension, wisdom, betrayal, abandonment and communion. I have yet to discover a sentiment in me that wasn't anticipated eons ago in the heart of the psalmist.

This is not to make the ludicrous claim that the world is now what it was 2,500 years ago. Obviously not. So turbulent have been its revolutions—agricultural, scientific, industrial, green, digital and, hopefully very soon, ecological—that an ancient Israelite would feel more lost in the wilds of modernity than she did in the deserts beyond the Red Sea. Likewise, the images, understandings and realities of yore seem at best only remotely familiar to us “uber”-urbanized moderns. The sheep, citadels, swords, chariots, vineyards,

customs, political alliances and technologies alive in the psalms can appear mere dead letters to our screen-bred eyes. While timeless in their insight and honesty, the psalms also stand, perhaps demand, to be renovated by each succeeding generation, using the everyday stuff of the contemporary world to allow their deepest possible reach into the soul and psyche of each reader, uniquely placed in the curiosity shop of history.

What follows is my effort to pray these classic and perennial prayers in a context far removed from ancient Israel. Although the emotions and aspirations remain the same, the actors have changed. Now climate change, forced migration, extinction of species, eco-anxiety, consumerism, terrorism and intolerance are the enemies from whom the modern psalmist must plead deliverance. Now God is encountered more often on the city street or the forest trail than in the Temple sanctuary.

The book attempts to restore to today's faithful reader, who has lived victory and defeat in her relation with the divine, the authenticity and rawness inherent to the ancient psalms. It does so to make as real and resonant as possible this relation that took root millennia ago and continues evolving within every person living in a certain time and place. Ultimately, these renovated psalms seek to touch God's presence in the joys and jabs of the life of a believer who is both buffeted and buoyed by the early 21st century.

Such a renovation is best understood as reupholstery. When the fabric of a favourite armchair can no longer contain its stuffing, when the wear and tear already shown starts preventing you from sitting down for fear of inflicting more

damage, then the time has come to replace the covering. But just the covering. Reupholstery always retains the frame, because the bones of the furniture in question remain strong. Replacing them would move us into the realm of carpentry, which requires an entirely different set of skills. Carpentry doesn't interest me. First, it isn't needed. The bones of the psalms are as solid today as ever. Second, once we start tinkering with the skeleton of a well-built chair, we run the risk of rendering it unserviceable. Chairs serve a standard purpose, and if you alter their size or shape too much, few people will be inclined to take a seat. They become uncomfortable conversation pieces, more or less useless.

That said, new upholstery can sometimes render a familiar piece almost unrecognizable. Some readers may accuse me not only of poor carpentry, but even of irreverent demolition. I hope that careful and repeated reading will clear me of these charges. In fact, I took my reupholstering very seriously: that is to say, prayerfully. Having studied the skeleton of the original, trying to feel the structural emotions that gave it its form and sturdiness, I then would contemplate the material of our modern world to see what best would cover that abiding, affective framework today. However hard you may find it to believe, I was not at all arbitrary in my rewritings. Not only do I consider that I stayed true to the structural expressions of feeling in the originals, but I would go so far as to say that my reupholstery has granted them new, serviceable lives by updating their colour, texture and style.

The reader can and should test these statements by first taking up the original psalm and then sitting with

my reupholstered version. Apart from a couple of obvious variances, the numbers appearing in this book correspond to those found in Roman Catholic bibles to enumerate the canonical psalms. This volume presents the first fifty. Reading the old and the new in tandem will bring out what I would call my fidelity to the former. It will also make the latter a good deal more comprehensible. Not that I fear my renditions will collapse if forced to stand alone. They are much stronger, however, when left leaning on the originals.

While tradition holds King David as their author, no self-respecting biblical scholar ascribes to him the full canon of the psalms. Yet their ancient composers were keen to sign his name to them. This famous attribution lent the psalms credibility. Their real authors experienced no compunction in writing in a voice not their own, in allowing their own emotive response to enter into the reality of another. Similarly, I have no remorse for borrowing the perspective of a tree, a butterfly, a refugee, a woman, an oppressed minority. I feel no need to apologize for taking such poetic licence, for the tradition of the psalms itself grants it.

“Anthropocene” is the term scientists coined to designate our modern reality: that the largest geographical, evolutionary force on the planet today is human. We are the main drivers of extinction, glacial recession, desertification, mineral transformation, material transportation, atmospheric constitution, chemical composition of water, the instability and migration of human and nonhuman populations, and more. We inhabit a world of our making, intentional or not. The Anthropocene is the dark colour of the walls of our present-day living room. Every reflective

work of art today must somehow match that interior or look irrelevant and out of place. Although not the typical method of interior design, the following psalms are consciously re-upholstered to set off the wall colour of the Anthropocene. By doing so, they intend to encourage their seated readers to take a better look around.



To the Core #10

Psalm 1

Happy are those who get happiness,
that is, who understand that God
is on their side. They sit down
together for long hours over tea,
avidly discussing life's blessed minutiae.

They are like trees.
Need I say more? Smiling slowly
sunward into a gentle blue eternity
full of fruit and leaves,
reaching a deep kindness
into the heart of Earth.

The ungrateful are not so,
but are like chaff
or, more pointedly, balloons
let slip from a disappointed birthday hand
and blown into steely power lines.
The Lord would love to give them another,
but they can't pry their anguished eyes
from the bit of airy colour trapped
far beyond their grasp.

Psalm 2

Another pipeline?
One more free-trade deal
to help us haul more easily
every blessed processed thing to market?
All for my own good and warmth and buying power.

Pop the dream we're living in, Lord.
Who can now afford the luxury
of shaking a head in disbelief?
The writing on the walls
of our big box stores and our malls

is not good advertising at all
for the bloody stuff in our carts.

With the same oil once used
for kinging sons
you anoint the Earth,
infirm yet no less royal,
whose reign will not end
although her castle lies in ruins.

You give to those who ask
humbly for the riches of humility.
We're on our knees, all right,
but haven't yet learned to beg.
Distract our pride long enough
to see the splendour of simplicity.
Then with heart in throat sincere
we'll speak happily of our need
of gentle you.

❧ Psalm 3 ❧

Mine enemies, who are they?
Who can count them?
As many as the stars
and as hidden by the
torpid lights rising off
the various Babylons that smear
the westernized sky at night.
Theirs is a trimmed-down god,

jealous of his allegiances
and bad choices,
quick to promise paradise
to any wolf, lone or tightly packed,
with teeth enough to tear
a little hell into the flesh
of a highly mediated world.

Lord, I can't tell you what I've
done to draw their hatred.
I suspect they themselves couldn't tell me,
were I to stop and ask them.

On the subway, in the street,
crossing a bridge, inside a café
even beside a mosque disfavoured
I could end up dismembered
simply for passing by.

I'm sick of us and them.
Sick of schoolyard deities
pushing and punching inside a circle
of puerile gawkers
anxious for the red of blood.

Lord, blow your teacher's whistle.
Put the whole stupidity to rest.
Confiscate all the hateful toys
that have been played with
to no good end,
for no one's fun,
least of all your own.

Psalm 4

Answer me, O God, when I call,
don't let it go to voicemail;
we've connected before
and it was good, I'd say, for both of us.
How much time do we have
to waste ping-ponging messages,
oscillating between two readinesses
to speak that pass like ships
in the night on a sea
populated by more plastic than fish?

O Lord, leave the phone-tag game
to others who don't buy the plan.
But I've always had you
as my provider, you've serviced me
since I had air enough to cry.

When I need to talk
I need to talk,
but the worst is when
the ringtone of that need is silenced.

Lord, you fill me
more than all-you-can-eat sushi.
We've connected before
and it's been good.
Let's not,
neither one of us,
ever forget that.