

Banquet without Walls

Hymns
on the Psalms

Richard Leach



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Banquet without Walls: Hymns on the Psalms by Richard Leach
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Note

To indicate on a text's page whether it has ever been set to music, the page notes may include a choral setting or an unpublished tune. See the Publications index for information on books cited in the footnotes.

Introduction

“Banquet without walls” is a phrase I wrote for the table set before us in the presence of our enemies in Psalm 23, and for the dinner tables at which Jesus welcomes outcasts. It also describes the Psalter itself, which has hosted so many singers and interpreters, in very many languages and musical styles, in countless synagogues, churches and other gatherings of God’s people, through the thousands of years since the psalms were written and collected. This book of metrical psalm paraphrases and psalm-based hymns is a sharing of some of what I have found at that banquet.

Most of these poems are for either congregational or choral song. A few are more suitable for choirs or other rehearsed singers than for congregations. I also offer them for devotional reading, on their own; and for study, read alongside the psalms themselves in as many translations and paraphrases as one wishes to have at hand. The psalms are prayer and song, to be spoken and sung; they are also scripture, to read and reflect on at length.

One hundred and forty-six texts are here, based on 99 different psalms, including 92 of the 105 psalms used in the Revised Common Lectionary. In the case of long psalms, I often followed the Lectionary’s choice of verses. There are complete metrical paraphrases of Psalms 22 and 31 from which stanzas may be chosen according to the verses used by the Lectionary; a text for each of the Lectionary’s seven selections from Psalm 119 (and an eighth for Psalm 119 based on two striking verses the Lectionary does not include); and so on.

Much of my work here is fairly straightforward paraphrase, often begun by finding a psalm line that fit a standard hymn meter with little alteration (“How Can the Young Keep Their Way Pure?” on Psalm 119:9-16, for example). In other cases, what I call “psalm-based hymns,” the treatment is freer, taking its overall shape from a psalm and grounded in it throughout (see “Over the Waves of Words,” on Psalm 8 or “Sighs That Lead to Words” on Psalm 5).

In a number of instances I have followed Isaac Watts in making explicit or strong implicit reference to Jesus (for example, the texts on Psalms 147 and 148). Texts such as “Clover, Thistle, Orange Blossom” and “All My Springs” come from dwelling upon and elaborating particular images found in a psalm. “Shadows” was based on single words from Psalm 23 and became an art song text. “This Is the First of Songs for Singing,” on Psalm 1, and “This Is the Song That Crowns Our Singing,” on Psalm 150, are purposely in the same meter.

The aim of all these approaches was to make poems that seemed uni-

fied wholes, all of a piece, as the psalms themselves sometimes do not seem to be. Even in Psalm 23, which is too familiar for us to be struck by it, we go from being sheep to being people with great abruptness—sheep in verse 4, people at a banquet table in verse 5.

Saying that the psalms may not seem unified is not to find fault with them. It is to say that unity is one of the things a poet writing in English, writing texts to be sung based on the psalms, has to offer. It is one of the things that make a collection such as this worthwhile to its readers and users.

In 2006 Irish poet Seamus Heaney published his translation of the ninth century Irish poem “Pangur Bán,” about a monk and his cat. The poem has been translated into English many times, and Heaney wrote that it “is a poem that Irish writers like to try their hand at, not in order to outdo the previous versions, but simply to get a more exact and intimate grip on the canonical goods.”¹

Like Irish poets trying their hands at “Pangur Bán,” Christian poets have been creating English psalm versions since the 16th century, and they could hardly be counted by now. To change the metaphor from banquet to fabric, many writers have wanted to feel the canonical material for themselves, and to find the forms that seemed to them well-suited to it. This collection is the result of trying my own hand at the psalms.

Feeling and shaping the canonical fabric for oneself is a kind of devotional practice. The resulting work can have value for others when personal devotion is partnered with poetic and theological craft. I have sought to do that. Poet and teacher Donald Davie wrote of those creating psalm versions: “The versifier has one gift, that of versifying; and that gift, the only one he or she has, is laid before the Throne.”² And, I would add, before the readers and singers of the church.

My thanks to the composers who have already worked with some of these texts, enabling me to make tune suggestions for many of them. A number of the texts here are already in print, with or without tunes, as noted in the page footnotes and the Publications page. Thanks as always to David Schaap and Selah Publishing.

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Pike County, Pennsylvania
March 23, 2009

References

- ¹ “Translator’s Note,” *Poetry*, April 2006, p. 5.
- ² *The Psalms in English*, ed. Donald Davie, New York: Penguin Books, 1996, p. li.

Banquet without Walls

Hymns
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This Is the First of Songs

This is the first of songs for singing:
happy are those who turn from sin,
although its paths are walked by many,
inviting others to join in.

This is the tree that keeps on growing:
life rooted near the word of God.
Fed by a deep delight in scripture,
fruit-laden branches spread abroad.

This is the chaff the wind will scatter:
all that defies the Holy One.
God blesses those whose ways are righteous,
rising upon them like the sun.

Psalm 2

Listen to the Rulers Scheme

Listen to the rulers scheme,
thinking they will cut the cords
by which they are bound to God,
scorning justice, mocking truth.
Once their efforts to be free
sent the Savior to his death.

Hear the laughter from on high!
Hear the rage as God declares:
I have made my king a throne;
he may smash what it is not his.
All that people do is clay,
but the will of God is steel.

Listen, rulers of the earth:
Serve the Lord! His wrath is quick.
If you turn your back on God,
death is walking at your side.
Happiness will come to all
who take refuge in our God.

The World Began with Speaking

The world began with speaking,
and words can take a world away.
I hear my foes' well-crafted words:
"There is no help for you in God."

But I can name you: God my safety,
God my glory, God my friend.
I call aloud, you answer me;
and all shall see the help you send.

My world comes from your giving.
I sleep and wake, sustained by you.
My foes cannot take this away,
though tens of thousands may arise.

For I can name you: God my safety....

Rise up, O Lord! Draw nearer—
to strike the faces of my foes!
You break their bold and brittle words;
may those who trust in you be blessed.

For I can name you: God my safety....

Psalm 4

I Need That Room You Gave Me, Lord

I need that room you gave me, Lord,
when I cried out to you before!
I am hemmed in by lies from those
who love them so, and seek for more.

They do not know what God has done:
he takes the faithful for his own.
The Lord hears when I call to him;
my cry says I am not alone.

When you are troubled, do not sin;
think deeply, and let silence come
to clothe your anger and your fear;
then come to God and worship him.

Though many call on you, O God,
with words worn smooth as tumbled stone,
your power to save can give my heart
a joy that they have never known.

So I lie down and sleep in peace;
you keep me safe, O Holy One;
that I may dare to rest awhile,
to lay both grief and gladness down.

Sighs That Lead to Words

Sighs that lead to words that lead to sighs,
in the early morning, when I rise:
Do you hear, O Lord? You hear, O Lord!

You are not a God who can be pleased
by a lying word or wicked deed.
You hate those who lie and thirst for blood.

You have sought and found me with your love.
Your love let me come into your house.
I will worship you; I will bow down.

Think of all my enemies, O God;
lead me in the way that I should go.
Hope that led to trust has led to hope.

Psalm 8

Over the Waves of Words

Over the waves of words rising and rushing,
crashing and foaming like rough seas at play,
your name, O Lord our God, holy, unspoken,
arcs like a rainbow that shines in the spray.

God, from the praises of children and babies,
you raise a shelter to still every foe,
welcoming us into life-giving quiet—
gathered before you, we sing what we know:

Sun, moon and stars give you praise with their silence,
angels adore you with bright skies of sound.
Yet you esteem us who chatter and babble,
over the bird, beast and fish we are crowned—
lifted up high that your praise may resound:
Alleluia, alleluia!

At Last There Is a Stronghold

At last there is a stronghold
for those who are oppressed!
O God, you are not power
that comes to reinforce
the boot heel of the mighty
upon those it would crush.
You are a trusted stronghold
for those who are oppressed.

At last, there is a message
that all the world should hear;
more than one people's prattle,
the praise of God on high.
For God avenges bloodshed
and hears the needy cry.
Our song will send a message
that all the world should hear.

At last someone will listen
when those in need cry out.
O God, see what I suffer,
the gates of death await;
I long to rise up singing
within your city gates.
You are the one who listens
when those in need cry out.

At last there is a judgment
that even nations face.
The pit they dug for others
will swallow them instead,
their own foot be entangled
within the net they hid.
O God, now bring the judgment
that even nations face.

Psalm 11

The Birds That Fly Away in Fear

The birds that fly away in fear
are seeking shelter, hunted prey.
God is our shelter now and here;
why should we need to fly away?

Yet we can hear the hounding news:
“Today the wicked are well armed,
their weapons ready to be aimed;
soon their surprise attack may come.”

And we hear fearful, forceful words:
“Escape, admit your helplessness.
Foundations of our life break down—
what can the righteous say or do?”

O God, your reign is not undone
by anything that people do.
Yet you feel rage at wickedness—
pour out your cleansing anger now!

God is our shelter now and here;
why should we need to fly away?
Come, Holy One, cast out our fear,
that we may stand and serve and pray.

O Lord, We Ask for Help Today

O Lord, we ask for help today.
Where have the godly people gone?
The faithful people, where are they?
We seek and keep on finding none.

What lies are volleyed back and forth
by lips that flatter, faking worth!—
displaying hearts of tender care,
concealing hearts of greed and fear.

O God, shut down the lips that say,
“Our words can get us all we seek;
we have our tongues—if we can speak,
then who can better us today?”

Though tinsel promises are made
to those in need, time after time,
God will rise up to give them aid;
his word is silver well-refined.

The wicked prowl on every side,
yet you are nearer than they are;
you guard us now and always, God,
as what is vile is lifted high.

Psalm 13

Listen, Hidden God

Listen, hidden God,
how long must I wait,
how long will you hide,
how long will my heart be full of sorrow?
How long, how long, how long?

Listen, hidden God,
come and save me now,
come and give me light,
come before I sleep and never waken.
Come now, come now, come now!

Listen, gracious God,
you will hear my praise,
you will hear my cry,
you will hear me sing of your salvation.
Be praised, be praised, be praised!

How Long Will You Ignore Me, God?

How long will you ignore me, God?
How long will you avert your eyes
while all I taste and see is pain?

How long will you forget me, God?
How long will honor seek and find
my enemies, while I am shamed?

I might as well be dead, O Lord,
if you do not do something now
to give me light in all this dark.

I trust you, God; who else would plead
with you this way? Within my heart
there is a place that wants to sing.

Give me a reason, I will sing!
The song is ready, set it free,
to bless the love you show at last.

Psalm 14

Foolish People, Foolish Words

Foolish people, foolish words;
foolish people, evil deeds—
God looks for a single one
who is wise, and there is none.
God finds only empty minds;
God hears mouths that never pray,
sees those who devour God's own
as if they were bread.

Foolish people, terror waits!
God is with the righteous ones.
Though you seek to crush the poor,
they find refuge in the Lord.
O that Israel would be saved,
helped with power from Zion now!
When God blesses them again,
they will be so glad!