Translating the Psalms

David Curzon

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The Psalms give voice to cries of despair and exclamations of gratitude. Such Supplications and Thanksgivings, to use the standard terms, account for a significant proportion of the Psalms. Those who want to be led from despair to gratitude have always needed help, and the Psalms have provided believers with aid for 25 centuries. The ability to give aid is the source of their greatness and their power and their ever-contemporary relevance. This ability in turn is based on their emotional logic and poetic quality.

Like all other literary classics, the Psalms are always in need of re-translation in order to have them in language, and with an interpretive emphasis, that is both accurate and contemporary. The translator, in other words, should have an agenda and a poetics. My agenda and its necessary poetics is to make the emotional logic of the psalms I translate as clear as possible in a language that conveys meaning densely enough to force reflection. My aim is to produce translations usable by contemporary believers and non-believers as structures of meditation.

Emotional logic

Psalm 13 exemplifies the emotional logic of many psalms. It starts with cries of despair:

Until when will You
forget me, Lord,
until the end?
Until when will You
withhold Yourself,
Lord, from me?
Until when need I
consult my soul
sorrow in my heart
all the day?
Until when will
my enemy exult?

It then modulates to demands:

Look! Answer me!
My Lord, my God,
light up my eyes
or else I'll sleep
the sleep of death,
or else my enemy
will say, 'I triumphed,
I overcame him,'
and my troublers will be
jubilant at my removal.

Then there is an abrupt recognition:

But I trust Your righteousness.

And then conclusions are derived from this recognition:

Let my heart rejoice
in Your salvation.
Let me sing to the Lord since
I have abundance.
The poetic logic of Psalm 13 is that of an emotional journey from despair to gratitude in four stages. In modern paraphrase these stages are:

I feel alone in myself; something - recognition? love? - has been withheld from me; my underlying emotion is sorrow; others don't seem to feel this way; they delight in my misery.

I want answers! I want enlightenment! If I don't get it I'll die! I don't want those around me to triumph!

But, to my surprise, in a flash of honest introspection, I discover that I still have basic trust.

If that's the case then my salvation is implanted as an indestructible capacity within me and I should use it. In fact I should sing, if only in praise of the limitless abundance of this potential, and the abundance of the world around me.

The feelings expressed at the beginning of Psalm 13 are infantile. The demands which follow are adolescent. The pivotal recognition is that of a realistic experienced adult. The conclusion is natural wisdom.

The infantile cries and adolescent demands, the whine, in Psalm 13, is repeated, and the most pathetic motive for despair - the views of others - is repeated and emphasized. As modern and ancient psychology both tell us, there is no escaping compulsive repetition except through meditative practice; through, in other words, the conscious accumulation of subjective experience of the sort Psalm 13 represents in such a simple and profound and, more importantly, usable manner. The wisdom at the end is not a detachable aphorism; it is of no significance without the emotional journey that precedes it. There is nothing mystical here, and no appeal to special experience or understanding. In fact the opening sections are embarrassingly realistic, giving expression to emotions most adults would be ashamed to acknowledge but which are universal.

The address is to God; the answer, which is adequate, is a change of heart. What must suffice is not in the future or in the control of an external power but in the living present. It is, apparently, inherent in the gift of temporal consciousness. The speaker is alive, and alive to this as a gift, and so has enough reason to sing. God does not answer, and the answer does not depend on belief even though the poem could not have been formed without a culture based on belief in a God who does respond.

What type of poem is Psalm 13? The standard lists of genres set up misleading categories; Psalm 13 is normally described as a psalm of "supplication" as distinct from "thanksgiving." However, as we have just seen, supplication is only the opening stance, matching the emotional state of the prospective user of the poem. Psalm 13 starts in supplication and ends in thanksgiving but it is not some unholy mixture of two pure genres. The problem lies not in the psalm but in the genres, which are not, as they should be, categories of process. Psalm 13, like so many others, should be thought of as written in the genre of "overcoming despair" or "facing despair." It represents a stream of consciousness with a desirable destination, a subjective norm. In short, Psalm 13 has the structure of a meditation. The psalm provides a short exemplary emotional journey for all those who wish to grapple with despair, and this is how it has been implicitly understood and used by believers over the centuries.

Existing translations do not bring out the structures of emotional logic in the Psalms. But these structures are the backbone of the Psalms' practical application in individual lives. This problem can be partly rectified by poetic layout, by indentations and stanza breaks. But if the desire to show logical structure as clearly as possible is paramount then it will also be a factor in word choice and even choice of syntax. For example, Psalm 15 has a very simple structure:
Who are those worthy of dwelling with God?
Those who have these characteristics, and these, and these
Short concluding statement

The layout and syntax of the cadenced prose of the King James translation, and of all modern translations known to me, even those in verse, do not make this structure as obvious as it should be. Here is the opening of the KJV:

Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?
He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart.
He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour.

The logic of this can be seen by using a different layout, and small changes in syntax:

Lord, who can be tenant in Your tent of meeting,
who can be housed on Your holy mountain?

Those who walk straight and do right,
who talk truth from their own heart,
who have no slander on their tongue,
who do no wrong to any colleague,
who raise no reproach against a neighbour ...

In more complex psalms, as we have seen even with Psalm 13, there are shifts of mood and address that need to be made clear in order to understand the emotional logic of the poem. Some of these shifts no doubt result from the splicing together of separately composed poems, as scholars more concerned with history than literature have argued. But when such splicing is done in modern times, by for example T. S. Eliot in "Ash Wednesday," the overall poem is still assumed to have coherence. Most modern poetic sequences, in fact, exhibit seemingly irrational shifts like those evident in many psalms. The translator of the Psalms who wants to end up with a verbal icon useful for meditation must assume a coherent overall design. Since the Psalms are anthology pieces drawn from a 500 year literary tradition, since, in other words, they are products of genius, this assumption is more than reasonable.

Scholarly translations of the psalms must indicate where the meaning of the Hebrew is unclear. But a translation that is meant to be both a poem and a guide to meditation cannot be content with scholarly scruples that break the coherence of the poem. The Psalms are compositions that were meant to be simple enough to be understood as they were sung or heard. It should be assumed that a clear meaning can be found by sympathetic understanding of the overall logic of the poem, utilizing scholarly results only where they help.

God

How can the Psalms, which presuppose and often address a personal God, be useful to non-believers, or to those who have faith in an abstract God who created the universe but doesn't answer requests?

As in an ode, the addressee in the psalms of supplication and thanksgiving is a literary convention. God does not answer supplications in any psalm; the answer to all questions and demands is in the form of a revelation within the psalmist. From a literary viewpoint, then, the Psalms address God in the same way Keats addressed a Grecian Urn, and a nightingale, and Psyche, and for the same reason, namely to focus and give voice to exclamations.

For anyone in despair, or who is grateful to be alive, and who wants to give expression to these fundamental orientations, God is the natural addressee. But it is possible to
explicitly address no one, as Paul Celan has done in his poem "Psalm," which begins, in Katherine Washburn's translation:

No One kneads us anew from earth and clay,
no one addresses our dust.
No One.

Laudeamus te, No One.

Blessed art thou, No One. Another literary possibility is to address No One implicitly, but no one has done this with any success, probably for good reason. After all, as Robinson Jeffers put it at the end of his poem, "The Great Explosion," the addressee offered by the science of the Big Bang is

faceless violence, the root of all things.

Unburdening yourself to this is not likely to be productive. But cries of existential despair and cries of gratitude for existence require an Addressee, and God is, to all intents and purposes, a literary necessity in giving expression to such cries. And since the God of the Psalms doesn't answer, a poem crying out to Him should pose no more problem to a competent secular reader than Keats' expostulations to a Grecian Urn.

Poetics

The Psalms deal with weighty subjects. But the language of the Psalms is not complex syntactically and the figurative language used is conventional, as we might expect with poems composed to be sung or chanted. A translation for liturgical use would have to be conditioned by the requirements of a musical tradition. In contrast, my aim was an English translation to be read slowly and alone by an individual, rather than sung or chanted in a group. This requires that the translation, while it cannot make use of complex sentence structures, must not be too easy to grasp, or else the Psalms' conventional figures of speech and simplicity of language, unsupported by music, could appear slight. The translation must slow the reader down or else its weighty content, which is not information, and not merely the overt meaning of the words, will be betrayed.

The Hebrew of the Psalms is compressed in expression, heavy with alliteration and assonance, and lacks rhyme. There is often parallelism, which is to say a strong break in the middle of the smallest poetic unit, and an echo of the first half of the unit in the second half. Compressed English has few prepositions or connectives and uses curt Anglo-Saxon words not lengthy multi-syllabic Latinate words. These simple considerations mean that the English poetic closest to the Hebrew of the Psalms is the old Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre, which does not rhyme, uses alliteration as a metrical marker and has a strong caesura in the middle of the line, and of course draws only from the Anglo-Saxon word-hoard. No translation of the Psalms using these features consistently as its basic poetic principle is known to me. I have in my translations used a strong-stress metric, with as much alliteration and assonance and as little Latinate vocabulary as seemed compatible with contemporary diction and accuracy.
PSALM 8

1  For the Chief Musician; on the gittit.
   A Psalm of David

2  Yahweh, our Lord,
   whose splendour is evident in the heavens,
   how glorious is Your Name in all the earth!

3  Out of the mouth of the suckled infant,
   You founded strength to account for Your foes,
   to send to rest the enemy, the avenger.

4  When I witness Your heavens,
   the work of Your fingers,
   the moon and stars
   which You established,

5  what are mortals
   that You would be mindful,
   or children of dust
   to win Your awareness,

6  and yet You made them
   little less than divine,
   and adorned them with
   glory and honour

7  and gave them reign,
   setting everything,
   all You made,
   beneath their feet,

8  each and all,
   sheep and cattle,
   the wild beasts,
   birds of the skies,
   fish of the sea,
   whatever passes over
   paths of ocean.

9  Lord, our Lord,
   How glorious is Your Name in all the earth!

   Translated from the Hebrew
   by David Curzon
PSALM 13

1 For the Chief Musician, a Psalm of David.

2 Until when will You forget me, Lord, until eternity? Until when will You withhold Yourself, Lord, from me?

3 Until when need I consult my soul throughout the day, sorrow in my heart? Until when will my enemy exult?

4 Look! Answer me! My Lord, my God, light up my eyes or else I'll sleep the sleep of death, or else my enemy will say, 'I triumphed, I overcame him,' and my troublers will be jubilant at my removal.

5 But I trust Your grace. My heart will rejoice at Your salvation and I will sing to the Lord since His reward is with me.

Translated from the Hebrew by David Curzon
PSALM 15

1 A Psalm of David
   Lord, who can be tenant in Your tent of meeting,
   who can be housed on Your holy mountain?

2 Those who walk straight and do right,
   who talk truth from their own heart,
   who have no slander on their tongue,
   who do no wrong to any colleague,
   who raise no reproach against a neighbour,

3 those who eye the vile and despise them,
   who honour those in awe of the Lord,
   who don't swerve when their word hurts them,
   who give no gold out at interest,
   who can't be corrupted to convict the innocent.

Those who act this way will not be shaken.

Translated from the Hebrew
by David Curzon
PSALM 19

1 For the Chief Musician, a Psalm of David.
2 The heavens profess the glory of God,
   the expanse proclaims what God's hands have made,
3 and day communes with day,
   and night confides in night,
4 and there is no speech,
   there are no words,
   the voice is not heard.
5 Their ray goes out to all the earth,
   their words to the end of the world.
6 God set the sun in the tent of heaven
   like a bridegroom coming from under the canopy,
    an athlete eager to run his race:
7 it rises from one end of heaven
   and completes its course in other reaches,
    with nothing hidden from its searching heat.
8 The Lord's Torah perfects,
    restoring the soul;
    the Lord's testimony attests,
    filling the simple with wisdom;
9 the Lord's precepts correct,
    pleasing the heart;
    the Lord's command clarifies,
    enlightening the sight;
10 awe of the Lord cleanses,
    preserving the eternal;
    the Lord's laws verify,
    confirming the righteous;
11 they are more desirable than gold,
    than the most refined of golds,
    sweeter than honey still in the comb,
    than the gold of that thick syrup;
12 By them am I, Your servant, guided;
    there is great compensation in keeping them.
13 Who can discern every error?
    Clean me of faults I can't perceive!
14 Keep me from arrogant acts!
    If they don't dominate
    I will not be held
    in grandiose rebellion.
15 May the words of my mouth
    and the meditations of my heart
    be deemed acceptable in Your presence,
    Lord, my rock, and my redeemer.

Translated from the Hebrew by David Curzon
PSALM 49

1  For the Chief Musician. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.
2  Hear this, each and every people!
   Listen, all who dwell on this world!
3  Yes, everyone, the ordinary and the important,
   the well-to-do and the poor as well.
4  My mouth will elaborate words of wisdom
   my heart meditates understanding,
5  my ear is attracted to parable,
   I'll give enigmas rhythmic settings.
6  Why be terrified in troubled times
   when encompassed by privileged iniquity,
7  by those who know wealth wins
   and boast of this, their great riches?
8  No one can redeem even a brother,
   or offer ransom to God for him
9  so that he'd always survive in life
   and never lower into the pit.
10 Redemption of a separate soul is beyond cost,
    one must for ever let go that hope.
11 But who can't see that wise men die,
    that the fool and the brutish are doomed too,
12 yet pass their possessions on to others,
    so the inward is, 'A house continues,
13 what is lived in can be given to heirs,'
    and estates are treated as if people.
14 Mortals do not live on in pomp;
    they perish in the manner of all animals.
15 This is the road of fools like these
    and of all after them who say the same:  Selah!
16 they are herded like sheep to their shearer --
    their shepherd is death -- and when it dawns
17 the upright triumph and the grave will strip
    all form from their habitation.
18 But Elohim will redeem my soul
    from the hand of Sheol.  God will gather me.  Selah!
19 Forget fears of one man's aggrandisement
    as his family's fortune grows and grows;
20 his honour does not descend with him,
    his wealth can't carry into death
21 even though, alive, he blessed his soul
    by saying 'People praise when you help yourself.'
22 That soul will be gathered to its ancestors
    who also couldn't see more light.
23 Mortals in pomp do not comprehend
    they perish in the manner of all animals.

Translated from the Hebrew by David Curzon
1 When Israel came out from Egypt,  
the House of Jacob from a strange nation,  
2 Judah became the haven of Heaven,  
Israel became God's dominion.

3 The sea had seen it and retreated,  
the course of the Jordan turned backward,  
4 mountains danced like rams,  
hills skipped like lambs.

5 What caused the sea to retreat?  
the course of the Jordan to turn?  
6 mountains to dance like rams?  
hills to skip like lambs?

7 The earth trembled at God's presence,  
at the presence of the Lord of Jacob,  
8 who changed the rock to a pool of water,  
the flint to a fountain.

Translated from the Hebrew  
by David Curzon
PSALM 126

1 A Song of Ascents

When God restored
the returned to Zion
we seemed then
like those who dream.

2 Our mouth then
filled with laughter,
our tongue with singing,
and among the nations
it was said then
'God has done, for them,
great things.'

3 God had, for us,
done great things;
we were joyful.

4 Restore our release, Lord,
like streams in the Negev!

5 Those who sow with tears
will reap with joy!

6 Those who go weeping
on their way bearing
seed, and sowing,
will surely come bearing
their sheaves with joy!

Translated from the Hebrew
by Ya'acov Hanoch, Gabriel Preil
and David Curzon
PSALM 131

1 A Song of Ascents, of David.

   Lord, my heart
   is not haughty
   and my eyes are not
   raised, and I
   am not concerned
   with greatness, with
   what is beyond me.

2 I have aligned
   and quieted my
   desire, like
   a weaned child
   still with mother,
   my desire is like
   a weaned child.

3 From now until
   the end of days,
   Israel, have
   hope in the Lord.

Translated from the Hebrew
by David Curzon
A Song of Ascents, of David.

How fine, how delightful,
for kindred to
reside in unity,

like the precious oil
anointing the head
and running down
the beard of Aaron,
and running over
the collar of his
large garments,

like the night dew
on Mount Hermon,
or coming down
on the mountains of Zion
where God commanded
until eternity
the blessing of life.

Translated from the Hebrew
by David Curzon
PSALM 134

1  A Song of Ascents

Bless the Lord
all you servants of the Lord
who stand in the night
in the house of the Lord:
2  lift your hands
toward the holy
and bless the Lord.

3  May the Lord,
He who made
heaven and earth,
bless you from Zion.

Translated from the Hebrew
by David Curzon
Ancient Hebrew Poetry in Translation

In the hands of a translator-poet, it is possible in some degree to render into English the beauty and power of ancient Hebrew poetry. David Curzon’s translations deserve to be widely known. I reproduce below examples of his art:

Genesis 49:2-27 A Testament of Curses and Blessings

Assemble and attend, sons of Jacob!
Attend to your father, who is Israel!

Reuben, you, first born,
My force, my vigor’s first fruit,
Advantaged in rank, advantaged in glory,
Wayward as water, advance no more!
You mounted on your father’s bed,
You polluted it — he mounted my couch!

Shimon and Levi, brothers indeed,
Their ware is weapons in a lawless cause.
May my soul not count inside their council,
My being not be in such assembly,
Since in anger they murder men,
At their will’s whim they maim.
I curse their rage, for it was ruthless,
And curse their frenzied fury.
I'll sunder them among Jacob,
Dismember them through all Israel.

Judah, you’ll be hailed by your brothers,
Your hand heavy on enemies’ necks,
Your father’s sons will bow before you.
Judah is a lion’s whelp —
On prey, my son, you mount up —
He lies low like a crouched lion,
Proud beast, who’d risk to rouse him?
The scepter shall not remove from Judah,
The ruler’s staff from between his feet;
The people will pay him homage,
Their tribute will be given him.
To a lavish vine he attaches a colt,
To the vine’s tendril he tethers a foal;
He washes garb in fine wine,
Rinses robes in the grape’s blood.
Eyes darker than red wine!
Teeth whiter than cream!

Zebulin shall inhabit the sea’s shore.
His shore a haven for ships,
His border shall be on Sidon.

Issachar is a strong donkey
Crouching among saddlebags.
When he grasped how good the site he settled,
How lovely the land he lived in,
He bent shoulders to bear burdens,
Became a serf, a slave to labor.
Dan will manage to command his people,  
The tribes of his kin in Israel.  
Dan will snake waysides, in wait,  
A hidden serpent in paths taken,  
Striking and biting a horse's heels,  
The reared rider tumbling abruptly.  

I wait for salvation, Yours, O Yahweh!  

Gad shall be goaded by ravaging bands,  
But he'll be a gadfly goading their heels.  

As for Asher, his food is fat,  
He gives others dishes for kings.  

Naphtali, a hind let loose,  
brings forth beautiful fawns.  

Joseph is a wild colt,  
A wild colt by a spring of water —  
A wild horse coursing the hillsides.  
The arrows of savage archers  
Have assailed and harried him  
But he bent his bow with steady hand,  
His own arms formed firm  
By the huge hands of Jacob's Lord.  
May the Name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,  
Your father's God, give aid,  
May Shaddai bring blessings,  
Blessings from heaven above,  
Blessings from the deep source of waters,  
Blessings of breasts, blessings of wombs.  
Your father's blessings surpass the bounty  
Beyond the bounds of the ancient mountains,  
May they all rest on the head of Joseph  
And crown the brow set above his brothers.  

Benjamin is an avid wolf:  
Before noon he feeds on foes,  
At nightfall divides the spoils.  

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Available online at www.forward.com/issues/2004/04.01.09/living3.html  

Curzon’s translation is extraordinary for its attempt to render the Testament of Jacob in an approximation of old Anglo-Saxon meter, with a norm of four stress lines per line, a strong pause in the middle of the line, and abundant use of alliteration and assonance. If Curzon’s translation is formatted so as to highlight the lines as such and the pauses at midline, and if allowance is made for a few more cases of two beat versets, enjambment, and tripartite lines, the result coincides with the scansion of the poem my text model suggests. If the translation is augmented to include Genesis 49:1b (understood as part of the poem), reduced by the omission of 49:18 (understood as an interpolation), and slightly retouched (see italicized words below), this is how it appears when laid out in accordance with the general rule and the length rule (see Appendix A):
Gather together, I shall lay out for you What'll befall you In days to come! (3:3):2

Assemble and attend Sons of Jacob! Attend to your father, who is Israel! 2/6/15 (2:2):3

Reuben, you, first born, My force, my vigor's first fruit, 3:3

Advantaged in rank, Advantaged in glory, 2:2

Wayward as water, Advance no more! 2:2

You mounted on your father's bed, You polluted it — he mounted my couch! 4/8/20 3:3

Shimon and Levi, brothers indeed, Their ware is weapons in a lawless cause. 3:3

May my soul not count inside their council, My being not be in such assembly, 3:3

Since in anger they murder men, At their will's whim they maim. 3:3

I curse their rage, for it was ruthless, And curse their frenzied fury. 3:2

I'll sunder them among Jacob, Dismember them through all Israel. 5/10/27 2:2

Judah, you, Your brothers will hail you, 2:2

Your hand heavy on enemies' necks, Your father's sons Will bow before you. 3:(2:2)

Judah is a lion's whelp — On prey, my son, you mount up — 3:3

He lies low like a crouched lion, Proud beast, who'd risk to rouse him? 4/9/23 3:3

The scepter shall not Remove from Judah, The ruler's staff from between his feet; (2:2):3

The people will pay him homage, Their tribute will be given him. 3:3

To a lavish vine he attaches a colt, To the vine's tendril he tethers a foal; 3:3

He washes garb in fine wine, Rinses robes in the grape's blood. 3:3

Eyes darker than red wine! Teeth whiter than cream! 5/11/31 3:3

Zebulun shall inhabit the sea's shore. His shore a haven for ships, His border shall be on Sidon. (3:3):2

Issachar is a strong donkey Crouching among saddlebags. 3:2

When he grasped how good the site he settled, How lovely the land he lived in, 3:3

He bent shoulders to bear burdens, Became a serf, a slave to labor. 3/6/17 2:3

Dan will manage to command his people, The tribes of his kin in Israel. 3:3

Dan will wait, Like a snake waysides, A hidden serpent in paths taken, (2:2):2

Striking and biting a horse's heels, The reared rider tumbling abruptly. 3/7/17 2:3

Gad shall be goaded by ravaging bands, But he'll be a gadfly goading their heels. 1/2/6 3:3

As for Asher, his food is fat, He gives others dishes for kings. 1/2/6 3:3

Naphtali, a hind let loose, Brings forth beautiful fawns. 1/2/5 3:2

Joseph is a wild colt, A wild colt by a spring of water — A wild horse coursing the hillsides. 3:(3:3)

The arrows of savage archers Have assailed and harried him, 2:3

But his bow stayed steady, His arms formed firm By the huge hands of Jacob's Lord. 3:(3:3)

By the Name of the Shepherd, The Rock of Israel, 2:2

By your father's God, — may He aid you, Shaddai, — may He bring you blessings, 3:2

Blessings from heaven above, Blessings from the deep, The source of waters. 3:(2:2)

Blessings of breasts, blessings of wombs, Blessings of fatherhood and manhood, 3:3

Beyond the blessings of the ancient mountains The bounty of the everlasting hills, 3:3

May they all rest on the head of Joseph And crown the brow set above his brothers. 9/21/56 3:3

Benjamin is an avid wolf: Before noon he feeds on foes, At nightfall divides the spoils. 1/3/9 3:3

*with the omission of 49:18

28/62/164 + 12/28/76 = 40/90/240 19/12