



The Passion of Ancient Poets

Exploring Why the Psalms Offend Us

By Mike Mennard

The ancient psalmists loved God, but they also loved their poetry. Their God-love is evident in the Psalms. However, their poetry-love is less obvious to casual readers. Some have naively suggested that the Psalms are spontaneous, coarse prayers uttered in the midst of passion. It is the view I learned as a boy in grade school. Yet a more critical study of the Psalms reveals something different. It shows me that the ancient psalmists, spanning more than a thousand years of Hebrew history, meticulously crafted their poetry with daring emotion and imaginative conventionalism.

The Psalms offend many modern readers because of their passion. Fiery curses, self-righteousness, arrogance and cruelty often surface in the Psalms. God is called upon to “bash the heads of infants,”¹ (Psalm 137) and “starve the children of enemies”² (Psalm 69). For many long-time Bible readers, these terrible images have become so familiar that they have lost their inhuman shock value. Yet this inherent anger and violence has made the Psalms, according to C. S. Lewis, “largely a closed book to many modern church-goers.”³ Many Psalms go essentially ignored by clergy and readers simply because they don’t know how such images fit into Scripture.

The Psalms as Poetry

To appreciate or tolerate the passion of the Psalms, we must understand that the writers were—first and foremost—poets. C. S. Lewis, in trying to come to grips with the Psalms' meaning said, "Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry."⁴ These ancient poets did not write theological theses or compact sermons. Their intentions were less doctrinal than liturgical and literary. Acceptance of this point alone starts us on a road towards increased inspiration and delight in the Psalms, and we, the modern readers, can ably confront what offends us.

Art is never produced in a vacuum. Artists, more than most, are moved by their environment and surrounding events, and the psalmists were no exception. Ancient Jewish history is a heart-breaking sequence of savagery and destruction. Many of the Psalms date back to the kingdoms of David and Solomon. And although this era represents the peak of Hebrew imperialism, the era was a brutal one.

David's regime was ruthless by necessity. Little nations throughout the region constantly postured themselves for stability and domination. For this reason, the David-Psalms solicited God for stability, as well as for revenge against those who threatened stability. I'm sure David would prove an interesting psychological study. Sometimes he manifests symptoms of paranoia common to leaders in precarious power; other times, he is a mature leader. Most importantly, he is real. And the ancient poets, unlike us today, never shied away from personal reality. This, perhaps, is the rub that offends our modern ears so concerned with appearances.

The most appalling Psalms appeared during and after the exile in Babylon and Persia. With the ten northern tribes essentially destroyed and Judah and Benjamin severely humiliated by exile, the poets' work grew darker. Horrible scenes and stories of fellow countrymen impaled on poles, flayed or dismembered still churned the stomachs of the poets. Psalm 137, maybe one of the latest of the Psalms, pulls at the heartstrings with gentle homesickness, but cuts deep with its call for severe

retribution. It is an anger I do not pretend to relate to, but I recognize its heart-smashing terror, agony and anger in the voices of Auschwitz survivors and Gulag alumni.

Thus, this offensive anger and language does not provide a pattern to live by, but rather a realistic view into the soul of an insufferably abused people. Although a God-blessed people, they were plunged into hell innumerable times and were keenly aware that life stinks. The psalmists never bandaged-over this realization with a panacea of euphemisms, and they littered their liturgical worship service with these dark images. In my mind, this open acceptance of life's horrors and human emotion makes the equally intense praise Psalms more powerful and profound.

Still, these arguments do little to help more modern readers accept their violence. This may be why we prefer to view the Psalms as "spontaneous" expressions of emotion, almost as if we're catching godly people off-guard. We imagine the writers blowing off steam, only to regret their words after a little prayer and a good night's sleep. But it is difficult to see how perfectly constructed poems—crafted according to conventional formulas—can be spontaneous. Rather, the quality of the Psalms—and the attention such quality demands—tells us that the psalmists meant what they wrote. And despite all this, I can find little evidence that God was offended by the psalmists' unharnessed emotion, and I was startled to learn that Jesus often quoted these raging poets.

The Feud Between Art and Religion

In college, I simultaneously pursued two degrees: theology and English literature. The strange tug-of-war between artists and clergy fascinated me—especially the internal struggle within the minds of literary artists who were also ministers such as John Donne, George Herbert and—one of my favorites—Lewis Carroll. The love-hate relationship between art and religion is a complicated one that I don't intend to dive deeply into. But I can't help but wonder if the underlying rift is this: art is very *worldly*—unafraid of the

gruesome reality of life—while religion is *other-worldly*—focused largely on an ideal vision of the “yet-to-come,” as well as the “as-it-should-be.” Religion fears that dwelling on life’s morbid reality may cause its parishioners to question the goodness or the omniscience of God. On the other hand, art—at least in the modern sense—fears that if life’s cruelty and humanity’s weaknesses are hidden, people will be unnecessarily burdened and guilt-whipped by their own and by religion’s idealism. It is a vicious cycle that the ancient psalmists and priests apparently licked.

Most notably during the Solomonic kingdom, the temple employed a guild of poets to enhance the nation’s worship. Many of the biblical Psalms grew out of this guild, as well as other Psalms that appear throughout Hebrew literature. Skilled poets and musicians were commissioned to create pieces for holy days, important feasts and specific temple functions, as well as to accompany the worshipping pilgrims as they journeyed to the temple and ascended the temple’s stairs. For primitive people who rarely ventured beyond their hometown border, the dynamic, vibrant Psalms must have added a magical ingredient to their God-worship. The cold realities embedded in the Psalms struck sympathetic nerves, and the exalted acknowledgment that the world has a benevolent Creator filled their poor lives with rich pride. It is a moving, primal, fertile mysticism that is lost in the current war between religion and art.

Modern religion has tried to recapture the magic, but instead has only conjured up mediocre art. Explore any Christian retail store and see its noteworthy but failed attempts. The walls and shelves are filled with cheap ceramic figurines, hastily-made poster prints (with convenient Bible texts) and scads of bumper-stickers, T-shirts and music—all bursting with conventionally-shallow church-jargon and clichés.

Likewise, art has tried to fill its religion-shaped void with anger and despair without hope. This has resulted in a glorification of suicide, drug-abuse, sex and death. In a recent visit to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I nearly cried at the skillfully-crafted hopelessness in some rooms. In many ways, the art culture has created a religion of its own—one that celebrates human ingenuity but

lacks the mind-exploding concept of divine imagination.

Of course, I’m making broad generalizations and polarizations, but only to make a point. I still highly recommend visiting art exhibits, just as I still highly recommend church. But I’m consumed with the idea that the marriage between quality art and religion must be repaired. Neither can achieve its magical paramount without the other. My study of ancient Hebrew poetry has instilled in me a covetous craving for this union.

Calling All Artists

I love the Psalms for their God-love, their passion and their craftsmanship. But I often wince at how we squash their soul-stirring zeal with mundane responsive readings and/or outright neglect. The Psalms, like all poetry and drama, should be skillfully read (or sung) aloud. Imagine how worship might be heightened if churches invited talented orators and readers to dramatically present the Psalms. What’s more, imagine if churches commissioned talented writers within the congregation to write new Psalms appropriate for worship, dedications and other special occasions. It might be a small step towards a rekindled marriage between religion and art.

Notes and References

1. Rosenberg, David. *The Poet’s Bible*. Hyperion: New York, 1990.
2. Ibid.
3. Lewis, C.S. *Reflections on the Psalms*. Harcourt Brace: New York, 1955.
4. Ibid.

Recommended Reading

- Robert Alter. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Basic Books, Inc.: New York. 1985.
- C. S. Lewis. *Reflections on the Psalms*. Harcourt Brace: New York, 1955.
- David Rosenberg. *The Poet’s Bible*. Hyperion: New York. 1990.
- Leland Ryken. *Words of Delight*. Baker Book House: Grand Rapids. 1987.
- Samuel Sandmel. *The Enjoyment of Scripture*. Oxford University Press: New York. 1972.



one

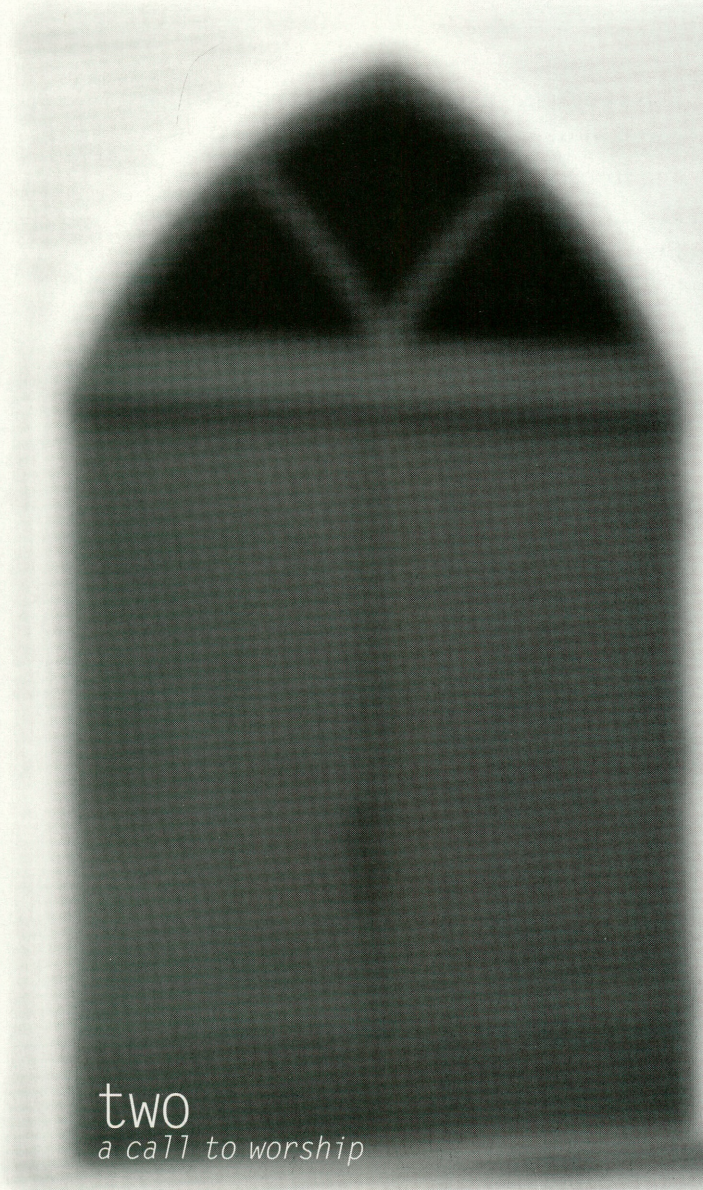
—Mike Mennard

Like the truck stop coffee I gulped late
outside Coalinga,
my worship is weak, salty,
gritty at the bottom.

Awaken me—in spite of my dilution.
Elyon (my feeder and potency), blacken
these lightly roasted grinds, leaking
only yellow, tasteless water
through a thick filter.

With heated squirts of mind
and emotion, recharge me,
revive me.
Then I will thicken with meaty flavor,
and you may sip of me.

And rich like a worshipper's soul
and a prophet's memory,
I will dance on your tongue
and warm your belly.



two
a call to worship
—Mike Mennard

If you're a molester, a thief,
a slut, come inside—
you are welcome here.

If you're a cross-burner, a hater, a liar
a wife-beater, a grudge-keeper,
a junk bond dealer, come inside—
there is still room.

Have you ever ignored
or admired someone because of creed
color, gender, poverty,
wealth—*yes*—you belong here, too.

Crowd in. *Crowd in!*
Make room for the selfish, the proud,
the pious.

Make way. *Make way!*
Pushers and junkies must be greeted as well.
And you—slave-chained to your liquor,
your sex, your food, your appearances, your status,
your religion—*yes*,
even you will find room enough here.

Welcome. *Welcome!*
Come warm yourselves in my huge house,
for I am Elyon, the God
who forgives you.
Come sit at my feet—press in tightly, please—
and let me see your hard faces twisted
with hellish hopelessness.

I have such immense dreams for each of you!
Come inside, please,
while there is still room.



—Mike Mennard

Then the ocean ranted,
pounding her foamy fists
on the sand.

And I stood silently
on the shore, sharing
her anger.

Seagulls hung from a truth-blown
wind that slit my lips
& trilled void in my ears.

With white bread & jerky,
I chased the birds
for answers.

The good gulls chanted—
I've never seen the righteous forsaken
But I threw sand at them & cried out—*I have!*

I've seen the cancer and sipped
the motor-oil they call coffee
in the surg-floor's waiting room.

I've seen first-hand the ballooning bellies,
the softball-sized knee-caps,
the bleached eyes of starvation.

I've seen fierce urban faces and their smirks
emptied by fear
and forced to feel nothing—or less.

I've heard the gospel gigs—
big on hair and bass, but light
on hell & poverty.

I've cried with convalescents,
tasted their mashed-carrot-and lima-bean medley,
and mopped up their cold urine.

I've cursed Elyon
with gusty screams that gashed the walls:
Why did you leave us?

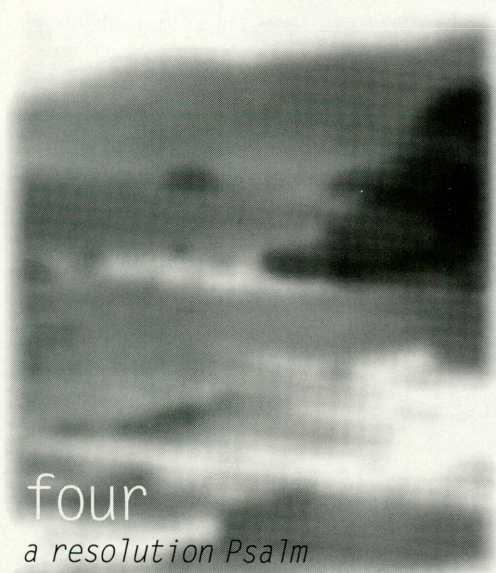
Nearby, little boys constructed sand castles
forged with styrofoam cups,
and I watched & remembered.

When the boys ran off in search of crabs,
high-tide crumbled their castles
into smooth bumps.

Elyon, I whispered, thus is my life.
Allow me this rage—this inner,
ardent rage.

Then the ocean ranted,
pounding her foamy fists
on the sand.

And I stood silently
on the shore, sharing
her anger.



four

a resolution Psalm

—Mike Mennard

Though memory pirates me—rips me apart
like a ragged sail in a raging storm—
I will not be moved

Though wise-cracking reviews deflate my enthusiasm—
I will not be moved

Though backstage fear pinches my bladder—
though conniving contracts cheat me with prolonged fine print—
though record execs change my name and tinker with my lyrics—
while image consultants point out my crooked teeth
and hairline—still—
I will not be moved

I covet—Elyon—nothing more—
nothing less
than rightness with you

Your big hand holds my head—your little hand my soul—
and though committees and columnists (and those kids
who rollerblade in the auditorium's parking lot)
shake scrutinizing fists at my face—
though I hack and vomit with fear—
your unwarranted esteem sticks to me—
and I—
I will not be moved



—Mike Mennard

And then I, the commoner, asked Elyon:
Why are your hands dirty?
Your jeans are caked with mud
and your patches peeled off—*Why?*

Elyon answered:

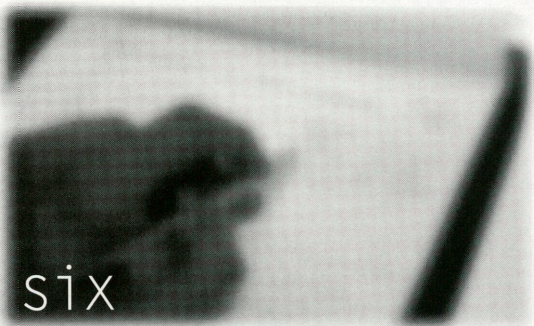
I live among the dung huts of the Maasai
and carry reeds down muddy paths to Calcutta.
I walk with Irion Jaya's naked men
and eat pureed broccoli with convalescents.
I sleep on benches beneath the eucalyptus trees
of Golden Gate Park and wake six stories high
to the Bronx's roar.

The commoner said:

Elyon, come inside
We've erected churches for you—synagogues,
cathedrals, and temples for you to warm yourself.
See, we're the loyal custodians of your comfort.

Elyon answered:

Then why are your hands clean?



—Mike Mennard

In your literate hand, Elyon, I'm a tool,
a number two pencil.
Uselessly dull, I have felt your curved fingers grab me
and lift me from a haphazardly packed desk drawer.
I have experienced the hot, benevolent mouth
of the sharpener,
known the pain of its fangs, ripping
apart my petty gripes, shredding
my sham façade, tearing
at my arrogance, exposing
for once a sharp
point.



—Mike Mennard

Today, Elyon, we're shopping for wigs.
It's a fun, family jaunt. I hope to buy some jeans as well.
My two sisters mockingly mimic the armless—
almost anatomically correct—mannequins,
and doubtful anyone in Penny's notices the daisy-printed scarf
gripping Mom's head.

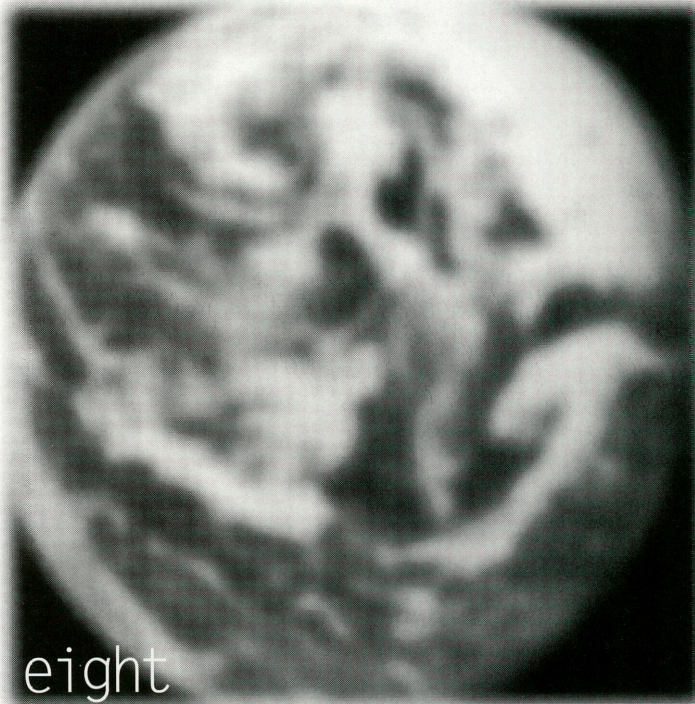
Today, Elyon, we're shopping for wigs.
And we hope to catch a matinee or late lunch afterwards.
Overwhelmed by the variety—
some pieces look real—I can't resist trying on a few myself.
It's easier to laugh while sporting
a bright red bouffant.

Today, Elyon, we're shopping for wigs.
It takes longer than it should, but I'm no shopper.
I'd rather find a bench and watch my sisters help Mom choose—
amuse her, even—make her smile with exaggerated gestures
and fake Italian accents.

Today, Elyon, we're shopping for wigs.
Faith comes loose in fistfuls, plugs the drain, and I'm left looking
for a new cosmos to succeed my current model.
Yet it's not enough to feel essential in the herky-
jerky of inanimate stuff.
I liked it better when the sun and stars revolved
around the earth, and the heaven's eleven layers hovered
over my head.

Tomorrow, perhaps, you will make something manageable
out of these moments—
provide me with an anecdote with a tidy moral at the end,
or a narrative open to amendments fit to modify
my ineffective universe.

But today, Elyon—
today, we're shopping for wigs.



—Mike Mennard

From Young's Observatory, I stared
into pale eyes of the past.
Blurred light from Andromeda—

having traveled through the space of space—
completed its two million year pilgrimage
at my eye.

The universe expands—in all directions
expands—but no hub
has yet been found.

Suns cluster into galaxies; galaxies
cluster into clusters
of galaxies; and clusters of clusters

cling to more clusters,
until I grieve at my
smallness.

I'm a fleck on an ill-fated rock
that spins within
the Milky-Way's swirling arm.

Yet my infinitesimal prayer to Elyon-gargantuan
is that my life's pilgrimage
—seventy years if I'm lucky—

might end at his eye.

Mike Mennard is the senior writer and editor for Pacific Union College's office of public relations. He is also a songwriter and recording artist and has released two albums with Eden Records.