

Julie Stoner

At Peace I Will Sleep

An Introduction to Psalms 3 through 6 in the Sullivan-Zohar Translation

While he was moderator of The Deep End forum of Eratosphere (the online poetry workshop associated with the journal AbleMuse), the inimitable Alan Sullivan panned a villanelle lullaby of mine as “Soporific. And not in a good way.” I remembered that characteristically wry—and, alas, characteristically accurate—assessment with a chuckle upon noticing, not far into the Sullivan-Zohar version of the Biblical book of Psalms, that insomnia is a running theme in Psalms 3 through 6. It is my pleasure to introduce these four decidedly non-soporific translations to readers of The Alabama Literary Review.

Alan devoted the final fifteen months of his battle with leukemia to translating the 78 Psalms (out of the Bible’s 150) that Jews attribute to King David. The goal was to take them directly from their Classical Hebrew into accurate but lyrical English. Aware of the mistranslations that have plagued English renderings since the King James Version, Alan worked in collaboration with an Israeli member of Eratosphere, Seree Cohen Zohar.

A formidable personality in her own right, Seree did not expect smooth sailing when she embarked on this project with Alan. Past experience had left her wary of the Christian propensity for seeing messianic prophecies everywhere they look in the Hebrew Scriptures—sometimes in blatant disregard of the literal definitions, contextual connotations, and cultural nuances of the words themselves. In an email message that Alan was proud to share on his blog, Fresh Bilge, Seree discussed “why—as I once mentioned—so many of us

stopped trying to assist the non-Jewish world with deeper explanations: because in 99.9% of the cases, the explanations are then forced into proving a theory predetermined by the whomever seeking them. You are a rare bird, indeed—and that is a major compliment. I was truly expecting that after a short short while, our ways might have to part on that very basis. And to hit on an appropriate wording within the constraints of versification just boggles my mind.”

That brings us to the subject of Alan’s versification, and what it contributes to a modern appreciation of this material. As evidenced by prefatory stage directions such as “to the choirmaster” and “for the flutes”, the psalms were originally composed as songs. (The untranslatable term “selah”, seen here in Psalms 3 and 4, is another indication of this. Although its precise meaning is uncertain, “selah” seems to indicate an instrumental bridge, a pause, or a participatory response from the community.) Alan’s metrical translation admirably preserves the musical feel of King David’s compositions.

Several distinct types of song are represented in the psalms, the most frequent of which is the lament. Psalms 3 through 6 are individual lamentations—that is, of the same genre as the more famous Psalm 22 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” in the Sullivan-Zohar rendering)—as opposed to communal lamentations, which bemoan the woes of an entire nation. Their personal nature is highlighted by the imagery of insomnia, which afflicts individuals rather than communities. Psalm 6 contains the most detailed account of agonized sleeplessness in this grouping: “My groaning has exhausted me: / I inundate my bed each night / and soak my bolster with my tears” (Psalm 6: verse 6).

Compare the strum of Alan’s tetrameter to the New American Bible’s unmetrical translation of the same verse: “I am wearied with sighing; / all night long tears drench my bed; / my couch is soaked with weeping.” Or the King James

Version: “I am weary with my groaning; / all the night make I my bed to swim; / I water my couch with my tears.” To my ear, Alan’s setting is far more evocative of a song, particularly one whose introduction specifies that it is to be performed “with strings.”

Psalm 3, subtitled “a psalm of David when he fled from Avshalom [Absalom], his son,” seems to depict a poet who has trouble nodding off because he fears a nocturnal assassination. Even the lines themselves seem a bit jumpy—trimeter, in contrast with the more flowing tetrameter lines we’ve just considered. After affirming his faith, David optimistically proposes that undisturbed—but still finite!—rest will constitute the best proof that God has heard his prayers. The verse “I will rest and sink into sleep; / I will wake: the Lord will sustain me” (3:5) immediately follows “I shall cry out loud to the Lord; / he will hear on his holy mountain” (3:4).

Similarly, Psalm 4 begins “Hear my entreaty, [...] Heed my prayer” (4:1) and ends “At peace I lie down, at peace I will sleep, / for you alone, Lord, make safe where I dwell” (4:8). Psalm 4 also hints that David wouldn’t mind sending his political opponents some insomnia, too...or that he would at least like to send his defiant “Kinsmen” (4:2) to bed to ponder their transgressions: the poet scolds them, “search your heart on your couch, and be still” (4:4). Even so, the soothing quality of Alan’s accentual (loose) tetrameter rendering contributes to the overall impression that David is seeking peace and reconciliation with these opponents, rather than destruction of them.

Although Psalm 5 does not explicitly refer to sleep, the promise “Lord, you will hear my voice at daybreak; / at daybreak I pray to you” (5:3) suggests that the poet is bartering future praise for a safe night’s rest. I dare such a reading because King David adopts a similar bargaining position in Psalm 6. After imploring God to “Heal me” (6:2) and “preserve me” (6:4), the poet points out that “In death is no recall of you. / In sheol who will give you thanks?” (6:5)

This line of reasoning suggests that, since good songwriters are hard to come by, keeping this one in service topside makes more sense than sending him into the shadowy underworld. Perhaps David had the opportunity to perfect such appeals while harpist to his notoriously volatile predecessor, King Saul (1 Samuel 16:14-23; 19:9-10).

Sheol's less-than-rosy picture of the afterlife accounts for the poet's eagerness for divine retribution and reward in this world, not the next. "And you, oh Lord, how long?" he asks impatiently at Psalm 6:3, and note his plea for the Lord to act "instantly" in 6:10. David exults when such waiting is over, as in Psalm 3: "You have struck my foes on the cheekbone, / shattered the teeth of the wicked" (3:7). Whether the violence of his enemies' subjugation is literal or metaphorical, physical safety in the here and now seems to be what the poet means by "Salvation comes from the Lord" in the following line (3:8).

Despite the armed rebellion alluded to in Psalm 3's subtitle, this group of psalms characterizes King David's enemies primarily as political dissenters, not warriors. A wordsmith himself, the poet identifies those "rising against me" (3:1) only by their statements (3:2). Psalm 4 alludes to troublingly blasphemous and, by extension, treasonous questions within the unstable community (4:6). David particularly underscores the vocal nature of his opponents in Psalm 5. After a four-line, trimeter introduction in which each line contains a reference to speech, the poet expands into tetrameter to remind God, "You abominate the troublemakers, / annihilate those who speak with guile" (5:5-6). The poet then shifts back into trimeter to catalog oral transgressions: "No faith is in their mouth; / [...] their throat, an open grave; / they flatter with their tongue" (5:9). David may or may not have such dissenters in mind when Psalm 3 refers to "shatter[ing] the teeth of the wicked" (3:7), but he certainly does when proposing a fitting fate in Psalm 5: "Let their own counsel fell them" (5:10).

The poetic justice of that last quotation illustrates David's adherence to a doctrine of tit for tat. Mercy, as distinct from pity, must be deserved. As part of the poet's appeal to God's mercy in Psalm 6, he inventories his own sufferings, thereby implying that he regards this mercy as something already earned, rather than a gift. The poet tallies his acts of worship, too—frequently mentioning his prayers (3:4, 4:1, 5:1-3, 6:8-9), and promising in Psalm 5 that “I will enter your house, blessed in abundance, / and bow toward your holy temple with awe” (5:7). After invoking the “God of justice” (4:1) and warning his kinsmen that they deserve divine retribution, David advises them to “Sacrifice rightly” (4:5) to offset their crimes and get back in God's good graces. In Psalm 5 he emphasizes the deserved nature of divine rewards, as well: “Let those who love your name/ also exult in you. / Lord, you bless the just” (5:11-12).

In sum, Psalms 3 through 6 prefer the predictability of a just God to the unpredictability of a boundlessly forgiving one. Still, despite David's confidence in this rigid moral accounting system, his inability to reliably calculate the Lord's next move by means of it is one of the things costing the anxious poet so much sleep.