THE SACRIFICE OF PRAISE

William Baer, *Psalter: A Sequence of Catholic Sonnets*
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Psalter is a collection of fifty-five sonnets that dramatically retell significant events in the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation. These sonnets are grouped according to five subdivisions within the two Testaments that make up the Bible: three from the Old Testament (The Pentateuch, The Law, and The Writings) and two from the New Testament (The Gospel and Acts, Epistles, Revelation). The title of each sonnet is followed by a reference to the biblical passage in which it is rooted. Readers who would like to read such passages should note—as the book's subtitle would imply—that the translation of the Bible used here is the Douay-Rheims, which differs from Protestant Bibles in the names and numberings of some of its books, chapters, verses, and the spelling of some proper names. (Baer is Roman Catholic.) What the poet has attempted here is nothing less than a comprehensive biblical narrative with a scope recalling that of an epic poem.

Baer entitles his book *Psalter*, a psalter being a book containing all the psalms and at times other related material. In the Middle Ages, psalters were beautifully made and often richly illuminated. Their use, both in the past and in our own time, has been either in public worship or in private devotion. As an example of the medieval bookmaker's art, psalters combine beauty, truth, and goodness in their aesthetic and theological dimensions. At their best, through words alone, Baer's sonnets do the same.

Psalms, of course, is a book of 150 poems in the Old Testament. The word *psalm* means a work having to do with music, the words of songs, and an accompanying instrument such as a harp or lyre. The psalms are also both praises and prayers. More of the psalms are traditionally attributed to King David than to any other author. The psalms are normally divided into five sections (like Baer's own *Psalter*) and range over the entire experience of the Jewish people. They include, among others, psalms about God as creator and judge, coronation psalms, psalms of lamentation, psalms pleading for protection, psalms about the history of

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Israel, and psalms of thanksgiving for the law and for God's love. Baer addresses many of the subjects of the psalms as discovered in the biblical episodes he recounts in his own sonnet-psalms. Thus Baer's "psalter" expands the range of meaning of that term to include the whole epic-like narrative of the Christian Bible, the greatest story ever told.

The first three groupings of Baer's sonnets contain poems on events from the Old Testament.

In the Pentateuch section, the reader journeys from Creation through the Fall and its sad consequences and then on to the life and works of Moses. The first poem, "Genesis," affirms the *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) theory of creation: everything that exists, even matter itself, began in the mind of God and was realized by God saying the name of the thing thus made: "a corporal universe, with dark and light, / with stars, and with a whirling spot of blue, / with countless creatures of the day and the night[.]"

The following poems—"Snake," "Eve," and "Adam"—retell the story of the Temptation and the Fall. Baer's ability to bring alive characters that speak for themselves is evident in "Snake" when Satan as the snake says to Adam and Eve: "Become as gods, transform to something new; / put hiss in your voice and fork your tongue in two." In "Eve" the first couple descends into a fallen world that is still "lovely" like Eden, but "the sun's burning too bright in a world replete / with thorns and sweat, thistles, and dust-thou-art." (Baer has a liking for hyphenated phrases throughout this collection.) In the fallen world Adam must continue the naming of things that he began in Eden by finding a new word for the fate of his son Abel: "'death'" ("Adam").

Life in a fallen state is a mixture of further degradation tempered by the occasional act of selfless heroism. Baer is frank and direct in "Sodom": he adheres to the traditional interpretation that homosexual acts led to Sodom's destruction. In the poem we see things from the perspective of Lot's sons-in-law, skeptical of Lot's warning to flee: "Surely no flashes of fire will rain from the sky, / incinerate this city and ignite / us all to fiery nothingness to die / within some horrid smoke-and-sulfur night: / our ashes whirling amid the charred debris, / then flushed with sludge in the filthy Sodom Sea." The prophetic tone and the clear analogy to the postbiblical morality of the modern world demonstrate that *Psalter* is not simply the Bible rhymed but a work with direct contemporary applications and implicit references to the present day.

Balancing "Sodom" is "Judah," a poem in which one of Joseph's brothers offers to stay in Egypt in place of Benjamin, so greatly loved by their father, Jacob. Joseph, a prophet-like interpreter of dreams, foresees that the self-sacrificing Judah ". . . will give his name / to the largest tribe, the kingdom, and the race, / which will pro-generate the Virgin's son, / Who'll sacrifice Himself for everyone."

The Pentateuch section closes with four poems concerning Moses: "Moses," "Tetragrammaton," "Pharaoh," and "Core." The first of these poems tells how Pharaoh's daughter drew the baby Moses from the water and senses his world-changing destiny. "Tetragrammaton" defends the doctrine of monotheism and the definition of God as pure being, truths revealed by God to Moses. "Tell the Israelites: *I am who I am,* / . . . / I am he who will be, and is, and was; / I am 'being itself': mysterious, strange, / perfect, and kind, who did, and always does, / without beginning or end, and without change." In "Pharaoh," Baer recounts the story of the plagues of Egypt from the viewpoint of

Pharaoh, who, as he endures the three days of darkness, comforts his son (soon to die in the final plague that will kill the firstborn): "he . . . tightly holds his son, / thinking, within their obsidian abyss, / 'Surely, nothing could be worse than this.'" In "Core," the rejection of Moses's authority by the Israelites in the desert is perhaps analogous to divisions within Christendom and the rejection by some believers of papal authority.

The second grouping of poems on Old Testament themes is The Law. Israel's demand for a king and that demand's unforeseen consequences are made clear in the first three poems. In "David," the shepherd-poet-warrior speaks while hiding from the anger of Saul: "hunted by the king, like a treacherous slave, / without my friends, my brothers, or my wife, / just waiting to be slaughtered in my cave." Then King Saul is seen turning—against the teachings of the Law—to a witch for help ("Endor"), though in the end he is killed, decapitated, and his headless corpse ". . . strung up high, before the day is done, / to rot beneath the Galilean sun."

In his turn, Solomon, wise builder of the Temple of the Lord, succumbs to his foreign wives and erects a temple to Chamos—"some pagan god"—haunted by having abandoned God's great gift to him of "a perfect unfailing sense of right and wrong" ("Solomon"). Elijah, retreating to Mount Sinai, seems to be the last prophet left who has not gone over to Baal, yet his distress is relieved when God visits him there, though not in wind, earthquake, storm, or fire but in ". . . a whisper in the air, / the small still voice of love. And God is there" ("Elijah").

This section closes with poems on a Syrian general who found faith in Israel's God by being healed of leprosy in the Jordan ("Naaman") and one who reveled in self-regard and evil and whose prophesied end finally came to be: "that dogs would eat the scented flesh of the dead, / and those who passed-on-by would see / the dog dung in the field and smell the smell / and ask 'Is that the beauty Jezebel?'" ("Jezebel").

The third and final grouping of Old Testament poems is The Writings. These poems depict biblical characters trying to fulfill the Law and maintain faith in God even in the direst of circumstances. In "Tobias" and "Judas Machabeus," which poems begin and end this section, leaders either bury the Jewish dead in defiance of the kings of Assyria (Tobias) or give a proper burial to other such dead even though they had violated the law by wearing "forbidden amulets and charms" (Judas Machabeus). In between these poems are sonnets about Job, the Messiah of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. Job comes to realize that fear of the Lord is a good thing, for only through fear can the soul be released from fear, fear thus becoming ". . . its own reward, which is also wise, is faith, is hope, is peace, / is tender mercy, over and over again, / until, at last, is love, is *love*. Amen" ("Job").

"Isaiah" is a sonnet-psalm of praise and rejoicing for the Messiah yet to come. Baer powerfully evokes Isaiah's gradual realization that the prophecy of a Virgin Birth and the sacrificial death of the Lamb of God are about nothing less than "'Emmanuel'" (God is with us): "Because the child to come, the masterpiece, / whose holy name shall be forever known / Is 'God, the Mighty,' 'God, the Prince of Peace.' / For God will come and dwell on David's throne, / and when this savior, finally, reveals his name, / He's God-Himself-forever-and-the-same." Other prophetic witnesses to God's power and providential design slowly unfolding in human history include Jeremiah, who sits "[i]n the smoldering ashes of Zion" lamenting the city's fall yet also firm in his faith that ". . . despite what Zion has become, / I

sit in the ashes and wait for Him-to-come" ("Jeremiah"). Just so, Daniel, passing the night in the den of (for now) peaceful lions, knows what is in store for his accusers the next day: "when the King will find him safe . . . / he'll turn against the Prophet's enemies / and toss them into the den, into the pit, / whose cries will screech and wail like a heathen hymn, / as the gentle cats rip them limb from limb" ("Daniel").

The reader of these Old Testament sonnets is left, much like the reader of the Old Testament itself, with the conviction that—despite the witness of certain heroes and prophets—only a radical intervention by God in human history, in accordance with Isaiah's longings, offers any permanent hope for human beings groping blindly through time, unable to adhere firmly and consistently to the Law and the Writings, wandering farther and farther from God in the ever darkening shadows that began with the Pentateuch's story of the Fall.

Sonnets about such divine intervention as related in the New Testament are in two groupings: the Gospel and Acts, Epistles, Revelation.

The Gospel section contains twenty-five of the fifty-five sonnets in *Psalter*, making it by far the largest of the five groupings of poems. Baer takes us from the Annunciation through the Crucifixion and a post-Resurrection appearance of Christ to his disciples. "Theotokos" presents Mary as the seemingly "obscure Jewish girl" destined to say *yes* to God and become the God-bearer (*Theotokos*) of Christ "humbly accepting she-knows-not-what, / singing her silent Magnificat." In both "Visitation" (Mary and Elizabeth) and "Centurion," Baer affirms the sanctity of all human life beginning in the womb: the unborn John—". . . her own and living and unborn child"—leaps in Elizabeth's womb when the also expectant Mary draws near, and a centurion charged by Herod with killing Hebrew children is struck with guilt when he recalls his mother's voice from the past saying, "'Whoever injures a child is a fiendish thing[.]'"

"Wizard" is spoken by one of the Wise Men who is overawed by the Christ Child. The other two Magi have given the child gold for his kingship and myrrh for his humanity, while the speaking Wise Man, for Christ's divinity, ". . . was . . . the blessed and lucky one, / who gave the frankincense to Mary's son." Mary's serenity during the flight into Egypt is hauntingly captured in "Egypt," spoken by Joseph, who worries for the family as ". . . Mary smiles and sings to calm our fears / a song that seems the music of the spheres."

Other poems, such as "Love Your Enemies," address Christ's radical teachings. A listener to Christ exclaims: "Did he *really* say that? Never despise / our enemies? . . . / . . . / Instead, do good to them. And pray for them. / And love them in your pains, in your disgrace, / even when they spit into your face." In "The Narrow Gate," Christ says unequivocally that ". . . only a few / are chosen to enter paradise / . . . / So come to the feast when you hear the wedding bell," a dominical rebuke of what in the present day is a drift toward universalism in salvation. Against such teachings stand the Sadducees, who declare themselves to be "the subtle freethinkers of Palestine[.] / . . . / We're rationalists: we doubt, we probe, we pry, / we study the part, we scrutinize the whole. / We dismiss the afterlife and we deny / the angels and the immortality of the soul." The application of this poem to certain modern thinkers and schools of thought is clear.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is presented and defended in two sonnets: "Eat My Flesh" and "HOC EST CORPUS MEUM" (This is my body). Baer

quotes Christ in the first of these poems—"I *am* the living bread"—and argues that Christ "didn't equivocate, / or mollify, or cleverly intermesh / his metaphors" ("Eat My Flesh"). In the second poem, Baer is even more forceful: "Hoc *est*. This *is*. Not 'like,' or 'as,' or 'for,' / and not a symbol or similitude, / and not a figure or a metaphor. / . . . / The body is His. The body's flesh is His. / Hoc *est* enim, this is, this is, this *is*." Another traditional teaching defended is the Petrine doctrine. Christ founds his church on Peter (also called Cephas—the Rock). This is Christ's undivided church: "My church is one, is holy, is sublime, / protected until the very end of time" ("Peter").

As the poems move into the last days before the Crucifixion, Baer takes us to the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane. The title poem, "Psalter," finds Christ and the disciples before the ascent of Mount Olive "singing the psalms, under their melodic spell, / the Hallel psalms, the canticles of praise, / and Jesus sang the words he knew so well, / taught to him by Mary in his childhood days, / . . . / 'I will raise up the chalice of salvation,' / singing to his Father, in these final days, / 'I sacrifice to thee the sacrifice of praise.'" In "Gethsemani," Christ reconciles himself to drinking "the bloody chalice of agony"—an agony come from "the dreadful fact / that despite his efforts from now to Pentecost, / not all the world will properly react, / and many will still reject him and be lost. / And so, his blood, like sweat, without a sound, / seeps through his flesh and trickles to the ground." These two poems lie at the heart of *Psalter*.

The Crucifixion itself is the main subject of just one poem, "Eclipse," which is spoken by the thief who was crucified with Jesus and was saved. The thief asks Christ to let him enter the Kingdom and then says: ". . . the earth begins to shudder and sway, / but salvation is right beside me, even now, / above the abyss, at the shores of the River Styx, / dying, like me, on a Roman crucifix." The Styx/crucifix rhyme is brilliant not only technically but also as a way of saying that Christ superseded and thus brought an end to the false mythological gods of the Roman world by dying, in of all ways, as a disgraced criminal. The Gospel section ends with "The Upper Room," a poem in which the risen Christ appears to the disciples, tells them to receive the Holy Spirit, and prepares them further to study, understand, and spread the gospel and to build Christ's church in the world. This poem is a skillfully placed transition into the final grouping of poems in *Psalter*.

The second section of poems concerning the New Testament is Acts, Epistles, Revelation. In these sonnets Baer recounts the disseminating of the gospel, especially by Paul, and the teachings of Paul and James. In "Ethiopian," a "mighty minister of the Queen" who is puzzling over a passage of Isaiah foretelling the coming of the Suffering Servant, or Messiah, is assisted by Philip: "So Philip explained, beneath the Gaza skies, / and the truths of the world opened before their eyes." In "Love," the Pauline doctrine recorded in 1 Corinthians is beautifully evoked: "Love thinks no evil, it thinks no wrong, / it hopes, believes, endures, prevails, / love envieth not, it suffereth long, / it never turns, it never fails. / Have love, have faith, have hope, again and again, / but Love is the greatest of these. Amen."

Complementing the teachings in "Love" is "James" wherein the importance of adding works to faith is addressed: "So follow all the ten commandments, then / *live* the beatitudes. Do as they say, / remember that when Jesus comes again, / he'll judge us 'by our works' on Judgment Day. / Don't listen to the vipers. Don't be misled. / Remember

that faith without good works is dead." The last three poems of this section and of the whole book are "Lukewarm," "Patmos," and "The New Jerusalem," all based on passages in Revelation (Apocalypse). "Lukewarm" is about John's admonishment of the Laodiceans for being neither hot nor cold in their faith (something cold being refreshing and something hot being medicinal): "This is not the time to turn away, / to hesitate, or make the easy choice, / or be indifferent. Listen to what I say: / Be zealous. Alert. And hear my voice. / I stand outside your door and knock. / Open the gate. Unlock the lock." In "Patmos," John foresees the final confrontation of Christ and Satan at the end of time: ". . . the fallen Lucifer / . . . looks at Christ with hate, with pride / in his deceits, his lies, the sins he'd wrought, / and all the souls destroyed and vilified / And then, the Lamb, with but a single thought, / casts off the sulfur-stinking hypocrite / into the flaming depths of the bottomless pit."

In *Psalter*'s final poem, "The New Jerusalem," Satan's Hell gives way to John's vision of the celestial city: "a crystalline city, bathed in heavenly light, / adorned with every kind of precious stone: / sapphire, emerald, topaz, aquamarine, / amethyst, and jasper in a city of gold, / with the loving face of God, the Nazarene." The poem closes with a warning by Christ to be ready for his return: ". . . I'm coming fast: / The Alpha, the Omega, the first, and the last." And thus comes to an end Baer's poetic account of the Bible's story of the human journey from Eden and the Fall into the historical world up to the Incarnation and then on to the establishing of Christ's church on earth and at last to the final gathering of the saved in a new and better paradise than Eden, the New Jerusalem.

William Baer has won prestigious awards for previous collections of verse including the T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize and the X. J. Kennedy Poetry Prize. He has also made a major contribution to the revival of traditional metrical poetry as editor of *The Formalist: A Journal of Metrical Poetry* (1990–2004) and currently as contributing editor to *Measure: A Review of Formal Poetry* (2005–present), headquartered at the University of Evansville in Evansville, Indiana, where Baer holds an endowed chair in English and American literature. Baer's deep commitment to traditional verse as well as to the traditional values of the Roman Catholic faith is fully evident in *Psalter*. The epigraph to the whole collection is, appropriately, from the Psalms: *Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei.* (The heavens are telling the glory of God.) The cover of the book—Gustave's Doré's engraving "Abraham and the Three Angels" (printed here against a red background)—also adds to the effect of the book as a whole: both the Bible and Creation as holy books that speak God's language and the ancient law of hospitality that, in Abraham's case, led to the proper reception of three visitors who turned out to be divine messengers from God himself. The closing admonition of *Psalter*'s final poem, "The New Jerusalem," quoted above, rounds back nicely to the epigraph and cover art.

Baer's goal in *Psalter* is an ambitious one: to retell dramatically, from a Roman Catholic perspective, and in language often simple and deep, like that of Scripture itself, the story of the Bible in fifty-five sonnets on key episodes in that narrative. John Milton's line in the Argument to book 1 of *Paradise Lost* comes to mind—to pursue "Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime"—although Baer did not set out to write an epic poem but, more modestly, a middle-length sequence of sonnets. Still, the reader can only wonder at how much time and effort must have gone into researching and writing these poems.

Baer's poems are not without flaws. There

are sometimes minor infelicities in rhyme, meter, rhythm, syntax, and diction, as well as in the use of conventional or repeated expressions. Perhaps such are all but unavoidable in so many sonnets on a single theme, however great that theme may be, but the compensations that come from Baer's poetry at its best (as it often is) are sufficient reward for the occasional Homeric nod. *Psalter* would bring both delight and instruction to anyone interested in contemporary religious poetry written in a traditional literary form. The volume would also be an excellent text for an adult education class, especially, but not exclusively, in a Roman Catholic parish. As in the volume's title poem, "Psalter," Baer has sung with both profound devotion and admirable poetic skill these fifty-five sonnet-psalms that make up his own "sacrifice of praise."