

Meekness

Psalm 45 and the strange word at its centre

• • •

NORM REED

The Poet's Condition

The psalm does not begin with the King. It begins with the man who has to write about him.

*My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the King;
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.*

The verb behind “overflows” is rachash, and it appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. That makes it hard to pin down. The lexicons reach for words like stirring, boiling, seething — something moving in a vessel that will not stay still. Whatever it means precisely, it is not the language of a man sitting down to compose. It is the language of a man who has been overtaken by something and is trying to keep up with it.

The image he chooses for himself confirms it. He is not the author. He is the scribe — and a *ready* one, quick, practised, the kind of man kept at a court for exactly this: to take down what someone else is saying, fast, without losing any of it. The tongue becomes an instrument. The words are arriving from somewhere.

So the psalm opens by telling us what kind of psalm it is. Not a considered assessment of a King, arrived at over time. A transcription. Something is boiling over, and the poet's whole task is to get it onto the page before it stops.

It is worth holding that posture through everything that follows. The sword, the arrows, the throne, the strange word in the middle of verse four — all of it comes to us from a man who could not sit still while he wrote it.

A Wedding Song and Its King

The superscription calls it *shir yedidot* — a love song, or a song of loves. It is set for the sons of Korah, to a tune called “Lilies.” Whatever else this psalm is, it began as wedding music.

That matters, because it means the psalm has a first occasion. Somewhere behind it stands an actual king on an actual day, with a bride being brought to him in embroidered robes, and a court poet who had a job to do. Verse 9 mentions ivory palaces and a queen in gold of Ophir. Verse 12 has the daughter of Tyre arriving with a gift. These are not symbols reaching for a meaning. They are furniture. Someone was there.

The opening has the feel of another book. A heart overflowing, a bride in gold, ivory palaces, the fragrance of myrrh and aloes and cassia — the vocabulary of the Song of Songs is close enough that the two seem to share a room. Both are wedding poetry, both were read messianically long before the Church did so, and both have the same difficulty attached: the language exceeds the occasion, and the reader must decide what to do about that.

Which king is not recoverable. Solomon is the usual guess, and the wealth and the foreign marriage fit. Ahab and Jezebel have been proposed, less kindly. Others leave it unnamed. The psalm does not say, and the not-saying may be deliberate.

Because the language will not stay inside the occasion. A court poet flatters — that is the form, and readers of the ancient Near East expected it. But somewhere between the sword on the thigh and the throne that stands forever, the flattery stops being survivable as flattery. No Israelite poet addresses a king of Israel as God and expects to keep his position, or his life. Somewhere in that verse the wedding song stops being a wedding song.

This is where the commentators divide, and the division is old.

Calvin holds the ground firmly: Solomon first, and Christ as the reality Solomon dimly shadowed. He is impatient with readings that leap over the historical king, because the psalm plainly has one. Augustine goes the other way and goes early — straight to Christ and the Church, the queen at the right hand read as the bride, the whole psalm a marriage song for the Son. Delitzsch and Kidner both work the middle: a real royal wedding whose language overshoots any possible occupant of the throne so far that it demands a greater referent. Kidner puts it plainly — the psalm outgrows its subject.

The New Testament settles the direction, if not the details. Hebrews 1:8–9 quotes verses 6 and 7 and applies them to the Son, in a chain of texts assembled to show that the Son is greater than the angels. The writer is not making a devotional application. He is arguing, and the psalm is his evidence.

So the Christian reading of Psalm 45 is not an overlay. It is a move the New Testament makes first, and rests an argument on.

What that leaves us with is a psalm doing two things at once, which is uncomfortable and probably correct. A wedding happened. A poet wrote it down. And the words he took down were too large for the man in front of him.

The King and the Sword

Then the poet turns to the King, and the register changes.

You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendour and majesty.

Mighty one is gibbor — the word for a warrior, a champion, the man you send out when the matter will be settled by force. It sits oddly beside the grace poured on his lips. The King is a speaker and a fighter, and the psalm does not seem to think these are in tension.

The sword goes on the thigh. That is where a sword rests when it is not yet drawn, and it is a detail a poet only includes if he has seen it done. The King is armed and standing still.

Then he moves.

In your majesty ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness; let your right hand teach you awesome deeds. Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the King's enemies; the peoples fall under you.

The Hebrew here is broken. Verse 5 has no verb where English needs one — literally something like *your arrows sharp — peoples under you fall — in the heart of the King's enemies*. Translators fill in the gap. Something has gone wrong with the sentence, and the usual explanation is that the text was damaged somewhere along the way — which may well be right. But it also reads like a man watching a charge and saying what he sees as he sees it: the arrows, the falling, the enemies. Not the order that makes a sentence. The order they arrive in.

Either way, the poem speeds up and falls apart in the same place — the moment the King goes to war.

This is not a metaphor the psalm is using for something gentler. Arrows enter hearts. Peoples fall. The King rides out to win and he wins, and the poet watches it happen and can hardly get it down.

Hold that. The strangeness of the next verse depends on it.

The Strange Word

Go back to verse 4 and read the three words slowly.

Ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness.

Truth. Meekness. Righteousness.

Two of those belong in a war poem. A good King fights for what is true and he fights to set things right, and when he wins, truth and righteousness are what he establishes. Put either word beside a drawn sword and nothing jars.

The middle word does not belong at all.

Anavah. Meekness. Lowliness. The word for someone who does not push to the front. It sits between two words about power, in a poem about a King on a horse with arrows in his quiver, and it should not be there.

The temptation is to soften it into something a warrior can carry — restraint, perhaps, or chivalry. But the Hebrew will not go quietly. The related word is used of Moses in Numbers 12:3: *the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth*. Moses. The man who stood in front of

Pharaoh and did not move. The man who came down the mountain and broke the tablets. Whatever meekness is, it is not timidity, and it is not weakness dressed up.

It is power that will not grasp.

Moses had every reason to defend himself in Numbers 12 — his own brother and sister were speaking against him — and the text says he did not. Not because he could not. The chapter goes on to show what happens when God defends him instead. Meekness is what strength looks like when it refuses to seize what it could take.

Now put that back in verse 4.

The King rides out to war for the sake of truth, for the sake of meekness, for the sake of righteousness. He is not riding toward them. They are not what he wins. They are what he is riding in — the manner of the ride itself, the thing the whole advance is made of.

Which means the psalm has said something very strange about how this King fights. He wins, and he does not grasp. The arrows are sharp and the peoples fall and the sword is real, and the middle word is still meekness.

The royal poetry of the ancient world was written to celebrate kings who took what they wanted. That was what a king was for. The poet has watched this one ride out and has written down, in the middle of the battle, that he does not take.

This is the hinge of the psalm. Everything before it establishes that the fight is real. Everything after it — the throne, the anointing, the bride — depends on the character of the one fighting. Take meekness out of verse 4 and you have a war poem about a successful king, and there were many of those.

Leave it in and you have something no one else wrote.

The Throne and the Anointing

Then the psalm says the thing it should not be able to say.

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The sceptre of your kingdom is a sceptre of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

The Hebrew of the first line is genuinely contested, and it is worth saying so plainly. *Kis'akha elohim olam va'ed* can be read as direct address — *your throne, O God* — or as something else: *your throne is God's*, or *your divine throne*. The words permit all three. Translators have gone different ways with it for centuries, and a reader working from the Hebrew alone is not obliged to choose the first.

The writer of Hebrews chose the first. Quoting this psalm in his opening chapter, he takes the line as address and applies it to the Son — and he is not decorating a devotional point. He is building a case that the Son is greater than the angels, and this psalm is one of the texts he stands on. Whatever the Hebrew permits, the New Testament has read it one way and rested weight there.

But notice what comes next, because it is easy to read past.

*You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore
God has anointed you.*

Therefore. The anointing follows the loving and the hating. The order is not decorative — the psalm is saying that this King is set above his companions because of what he loves and what he refuses, not the other way round.

Character first. Commission after.

That is the same shape as verse 4, said differently. There the three words were what the ride was made of. Here the loved righteousness is what the anointing rests on. In both places the psalm insists that who the King is comes before what the King does, and that the doing is not separable from it.

Which is worth sitting with, because Scripture does not always run it this way. David was anointed as a boy and then spent years in caves being made into someone who could carry it. The oil came first and the character came slowly. But this King is not being formed on the way. What he loves and what he hates are already settled, and the anointing is the recognition of it.

What the Ride Is For

The psalm ends with the bride. The queen in gold of Ophir, the daughter brought to the King in embroidered robes, the virgin companions behind her, and a promise about sons and generations and the nations giving praise forever. The wedding is still the occasion. It was always the occasion.

But we have come a long way from the wedding.

What the poet took down that day was a King who is armed and who rides, who wins and does not grasp, whose throne stands and whose anointing rests on what he already loved. And a bride brought to him at the end of it.

Go back once more to the middle of it.

Ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness.

Everything in the psalm hangs on the little word before those three. Not toward. For. On account of. For the sake of.

The King does not ride out to acquire truth, or to establish meekness somewhere down the road, or to bring in righteousness when the fighting is done. He rides out *because* of them, *in* them, *made of* them. They are not the prize at the end of the campaign. They are the campaign.

That is a harder thing than a cause. A cause is something on the other side of the field — a banner, an objective, a reason worth spending yourself on. This is not that. This is a way of going, kept every day, all the way to a victory that is already certain.

And it explains something about why he came that the word *salvation* on its own does not quite reach. He came to win, and he won. But the winning was never separable from the manner of it. Truth and meekness and righteousness are not the means by which a greater end was achieved. They are as much the reason he came as the victory he secured.

The poet could not sit still while he wrote this. Something was boiling over in him, and he called himself a scribe because he could not keep up with what he was being given.

He had seen a King ride out. He had watched him win.

And he had noticed, in the middle of the charge, that the King did not grasp.

A shorter, personal companion piece — on coming to this psalm as a young man looking for a cause — is the reflection [Is There Not a Cause](#).

These reflections did not begin with artificial intelligence. They began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this manuscript, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression.