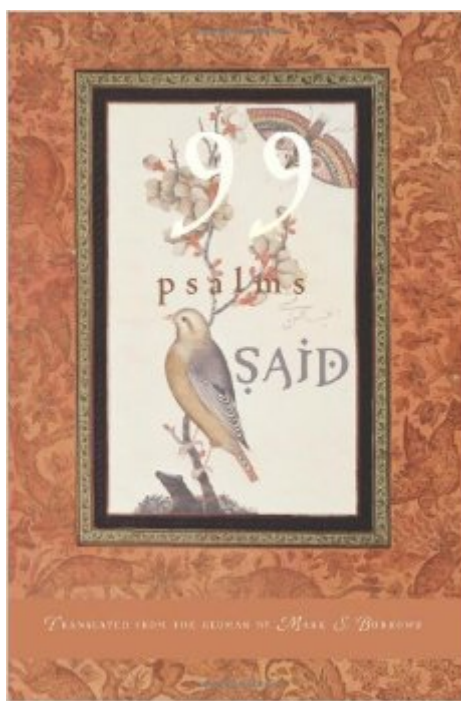


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99 Psalms



Synopsis

SAID's 99 Psalms are poems of praise and lament, of questioning and wondering. In the tradition of the Hebrew psalmist, they find their voice in exile, in this case one that is both existential and geographical. His decision to include 99 in this collection recalls the ancient Muslim tradition that ascribes 99 names to Allah, though the "lord" whom this psalmist addresses is not bounded by this or any other religious tradition. As psalms that turn to the "lord" with a lover's vulnerability, they avoid every trace of sentimentality. Rather, they seek to open us to the mystery of human life, warning us of the difficulties we face in our attempts to live peaceably together in the midst of our differences. These are prayers for passionate seekers and confounded believers alike, Muslim, Jewish or Christian. Taut-lined cries to God evoke the Hebrew psalms, yet their voice is from our world; speaking fiercely to what our current world forces upon us: the pierced and anguished heart in exile, wrestling Jacob-like with God while taking human flesh seriously to call our religious clichés into account. I know of no other prayer collection that propels us to such intimacy with the absence and presence of God. — Don E. Saliers, Wm. R. Cannon Distinguished Professor of Theology and Worship, Emory University

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A leading poet in Germany and a native of Iran, SAID has penned these new poems as a reflection of his struggle with the monotheistic traditions he grew up around and his own unique voice. What comes across as blunt and boisterous, fierce and solemn, are his depth of feelings for such things

as the atrocities of the last century while calling out his desire for the lord to act now. Much different in tone and perspective than the Psalter, these psalms by SAID touch the entire gamut of emotions while remaining forcefully aware of the present situation of political and moral disarray. SAID sounds a noisy gong in the midst of busy commerce and trade, asking his readers to become aware of the decadence and beauty that is all around them. One aspect of SAID's psalms that struck a chord with me is his insistence that the lord not be active just from a faraway distance but be mightily present today. He writes, "free me of the belief that you're only faithful from a distance and speak to me in the unharried speech of animals" (47, poem 31). The punctuated desire that the lord speak loudly from the realm of creation and not be a distant wayfarer is evident here. SAID yearns for the day when lord will be become visibly close to all peoples, not just fervent believers, but the entire cosmos might hear his voice thundering at his arrival. In another poem, he writes, "lord come back to me and make a new language because I refuse to choose between you and my passions" (63, poem 47). SAID is calling upon the lord to come back from a distant place and to speak clearly into his mind a language that can be understood by both his passions and his intellect.

He came to Germany to study engineering, and stayed because he was a bit too anti-Shah in his native Iran. The shah was overthrown, but his prospects were no better under the revolutionary Islamic regime. So he stayed in Germany, and wrote poetry. His name is SAID. He's a leading poet in Germany, and has published several collections (in German). And now Mark Burrows, translator of Rainer Maria Rilke's "Prayers of a Young Poet," has translated SAID's most recent collection of poetry, "99 Psalms," published by Paraclete Press. It is a perplexing volume of poetry. The poems are both like the psalms we're most familiar with - those of the Old Testament - and unlike them. Eight-five of the 99 psalms in the volume begin with the word "Lord," and the remaining 14 have the word "Lord" somewhere close to the beginning. And yet they are less about God and more about the human condition. And the volume contains 99 psalms - 99 being the number of names of Allah that are known (and there is one unknown name). These poems are not a fusion of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. Instead, they use the framework of psalmic poetry to collectively create a statement about the contemporary mind, society, and culture, the pain of the disconnectedness of exile. These are songs springing from the depth of pain, and they are more about that pain than they are about the idea of worship. Consider Psalm 6.

mark burrows, esteemed professor of poetry and divinity and poetry editor at spiritus: a journal of

christian spirituality, as well as the translator of a book of rilke's poetry, here publishes another translation of a poet whose work dares to explore the often unexplored landscape of the soul in exile. this time, burrows put his considerable intellect to the work of a poet iâ™d not ever known, one who goes by the pen name of SAID. the book is titled, "99 psalms: SAID," translated from german by mark s. burrows (paraclete press, 2013). born in tehran, SAID emigrated to germany as an engineering student in 1965, but he abandoned those studies to pursue a writing career, and through the power of his poetry, has become a prominent figure in the german literary scene. burrows first encountered SAID, he recalls, on a dreary, rain-soaked night in munich's old city hall in may of 2010, at a poetry reading held in conjunction with the second ecumenical Kirchentag, a massive gathering sponsored by the roman catholic church and the protestant church of germany. as SAID took to the microphone, burrows writes that he noticed the audience leaning forward, the better to absorb what flowed next. "the psalms he chose were blunt, vivid, and often startling in their language and imagery. none betrayed any trace of sentimentality; the fierce directness of their language conveyed a marked impatience with intolerance, probing the ambiguities of life with an unflinching honesty in order to remind us that if we had forgotten that purity isn't the sister of truth.

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