

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 34

PSALMS – Part One

I. Background

The psalms are a collection of 150 poetic pieces that were compiled for times of worship, contemplation, repentance, celebration, mourning, thanksgiving, singing, education, prayer and more. The psalms include passages that are historical as well as prophetic.

Who wrote the Psalms?

A variety of authors wrote the psalms over the history of Israel, spanning the Old Testament. King David and others (Asaph, Sons of Korah, Solomon, Moses, Heman and Ethan) wrote some, while unknown people wrote at least 50.

Why are they called “Psalms?”

The Hebrew title is “Praises” (“Tehillim”) or “Book of Praises” (“Soper Tehillim”). We get “Psalms” from the Greek word “psalmoi,” which references the musical nature of the psalms.

What are the Titles?

Most of the Psalms (116) have titles that precede the text. For example, Psalm 4 has “For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm of David.” With a few possible exceptions, the titles were never a part of the actual psalms; rather, they were an addition. Some of the titles relay information that is inaccurate (Psalm 34 compared to 1 Sam. 21:10ff). Further, the portions of the titles that seem to ascribe authorship do not necessarily do so. The statements “of David” can just as easily be translated “for David” in the sense of dedicated to or inspired by David.

The titles are in the Septuagint, so scholars recognize that the titles preserve certain old Jewish traditions about the Psalms.

What does “Selah” mean, anyway?

“Selah” is a word inserted 71 times in various psalms at a variety of places. Psalm 3, for example, has a “selah” after verses 2, 4 and 8. The meaning of “selah” is uncertain. Most consider it a musical term whose precise meaning has been lost over the ages.

Who decided what Psalms were in the Bible?

The Psalms have been considered part of the canon (“scripture”) since before Christ. They were translated into Greek as part of the Jewish scripture. They were also part of the Qumran community’s scriptures as evidenced in the Dead Sea Scrolls. 40 scrolls were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls that incorporate psalms. These date from around 150 B.C. to around 65 A.D. Among these manuscripts are found 126 of the 150 psalms. Probably, the missing psalms were originally in the manuscripts but were lost to deterioration and damage.

Several Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts indicate the Psalms were the dominant part of the third section of Hebrew scripture. One scroll (4QMMT) says:

[And] we have wr[itten] to you that you should examine the book of Moses, and the words of the Prophets, and Davi[d].

That statement is not unlike Jesus’ in Luke 24:44 – “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.”

When were all the different psalms put together?

Sometime prior to our history of the Bible, the Psalms were compiled. Most likely this completion was not a one time event. Prophets through the ages added individual psalms to the growing holy writings of the Hebrews.

II. Hebrew Poetry in General

The Oxford English Dictionary tells us poetry is “the expression...of thought, imagination or feeling in language and a form adapted to stir the imagination and emotions.” Hebrew poetry is exactly that but in a style different than typical English poetry.

A. What it is NOT

Unlike traditional English poetry, Hebrew poetry is not built around rhyme and rhythm. If one were reading the actual Hebrew, any rhyming would be mere coincidence, not planned. Similarly, the rhythms of English poetry would not be an object of the Hebrew poet.

B. The Poetic Key: Parallelism

The principle feature of Hebrew poetry is what scholars call “Parallelism.” Parallelism means a balanced thought pattern where one line of the poetry is compared to following lines (or line). Let’s break this down into two simplified English lines to explain this concept.

“I love apple pie;
I adore its flavor.”

In this illustration, there are two poetic lines. A common thought links them together. The second line is basically synonymous to the first. Another way to write Hebrew poetry would be to make the second line opposite in thought to the first. For example,

“I love apple pie;
Squash tastes awful.”

In Hebrew poetry, the *relationship* between the different lines can vary. There are different descriptive titles used for the various different relationships of the thought patterns. They are worth exploring, but probably not worth memorizing!

C. Parallelism Types

1. *Internal parallelism*

This is the shortest type of parallelism. Usually, just two lines are involved. There are three separate types of internal parallelism.

a. Synonymous parallelism.

Here the first line’s thought is repeated in the second line using different words. Sometimes, the second line uses exact synonyms for the first line. This type is called “identical parallelism.” Psalms 24:1 gives a good example:

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it;
The world, and all who live in it.

“The earth” in line one means the same as “the world” in line two. “[E]verything in it” in line one is synonymous with “all who live in it” in line two. Knowing this element of Hebrew poetry often helps understanding what words in a certain line reference or mean.

Sometimes, the second line is *similar* to the first although not identical synonyms. This type of synonymous parallelism is called, appropriately enough, “similar parallelism.” Psalm 19:2 provides an example:

Day after day they pour forth speech,
Night after night they display knowledge.

“Day” and “night” are certainly not the same, yet the point being made is the same. “Day after day” means something is ongoing. “Night after night” means the same thing.

b. Antithetic parallelism

In this type of internal parallelism, the second line forms a contrast to the first line. For example,

They are brought to their knees and fall;
But we rise up and stand firm. (20:8)

The contrast here is between “brought to their knees” and “rise up.” There is a similar contrast between “fall” and “stand firm.”

c. Synthetic parallelism

In this third type of synonymous parallelism, the second line adds meaning to the first. Sometimes, the second line completes the thought of the first.

I have installed my king
On Zion, my holy hill.” (2:6)

Other times, the second line provides a comparison to the first line.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my
God;
Than dwell in the tents of the wicked (84:10).

Still, at other times, the second line provides a reason for the first line.

But with you there is forgiveness;
Therefore you are feared (130:4).

There are several other types of synthetic parallelism, including some where the second line inverts the order of the first line. A number of books on Hebrew poetry or the Psalms set these types out.

2. *External Parallelism*

In this type of parallelism, there are more lines than two. In fact, you take multiple sets of two line parallelisms and they form an external verse. Sometimes these are synonymous; other times they are antithetic. A third type builds successively on each preceding verse (termed “Synthetic”). Brief examples may be useful:

- a. Synonymous (each stanza says the same thing).

The cords of death entangled me,
The torrents of destruction overwhelmed me;
The cords of the grave coiled around me,
The snares of death confronted me (18:45).

- b. Antithetic (each stanza or alternating stanza forms a contrast).

A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
Though you look for them, they will not be found.
But the meek will inherit the land,
And enjoy great peace (37:10, 11).

- c. Synthetic (succeeding stanzas add to the previous thought).

If we had forgotten the name of our God,

Or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
Would not God have discovered it,
Since he knows the secrets of the heart? (44:20-21).

D. Importance

Understanding the basics of Hebrew poetry helps prevent people from being overly technical in interpreting any certain word being used in repetition. It also helps in grasping the writer's flow of thought.

III. **Types of Psalms**

As mentioned above, the Psalms were written and used for a number of purposes. While all the psalms are worthy of time and study, some of the categories of usage noted earlier will serve as an overview of the book.

A. Worship

Among the worship Psalms, we find a number of Psalms, especially in the 135 range. In fact, Psalm 135 is often called "The Great Hallel," *hallel* being the Hebrew word for "praise." Psalm 135 is called that because the structure of the psalm is built around the word *hallel*.

The psalm begins "Praise [*hallel*] Yahweh. Praise [*hallel*] the name of Yahweh; praise [*hallel*] him, you servants of Yahweh, you who minister in the house of Yahweh."

Note the parallelism that underlies the worship nature of the psalm. There is synonymous parallelism as "praise Yahweh" is equivalent in meaning to "Praise the name of Yahweh." Similarly, "you servants of Yahweh" is synonymous with "you who minister in the house of the Lord."

This worship psalm recounts the Passover and exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Jewish tradition teaches that this psalm of worship was to be sung at the Passover feast. Most likely, Psalm 135 was the song sung by Jesus and the Apostles after the Last Supper where scripture records, "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." (Matt. 26:30).

As a worship psalm, the theme behind the psalm is that God has "worth" and is therefore "worth-y" of our "worth-ship" (The English word "worship" comes from two Anglo Saxon words *weorth* ["worth"]

and “scipe” from which we get “ascribe.” Our English word “worship” means “to ascribe worth.”

B. Contemplation

A number of the psalms were written out of times of contemplation and solitude. These psalms are still useful today for those times in life of reflection and meditation.

An example of this is Psalm 22. The psalm begins, “My God, my god, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?”

There are several things of note here. Stylistically, the parallelism is clear. Substantively, consider the contemplation and heart-to-heart communication ongoing between the author and God. It is not surprising that this psalm is the contemplative psalm that Jesus quoted from on the cross during the crucifixion. The psalm was also suitable for the Lord on the cross because it ends with victory of righteousness for future generations because “he has done it” (22:31). These words echo the Lord’s last words on the cross, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30).

C. Repentance

A number of the Psalms are confessions and psalms of repentance to God. The most well-known of these is Psalm 51. Traditionally, Psalm 51 is known as David’s psalm of repentance after the adulterous sin with Bathsheba. This Psalm has served as a model prayer of confession and repentance for God’s children for literally thousands of years.

D. Celebration

Many psalms were also written for celebrations. They were songs families sang on their trips to Jerusalem for annual festivals. People sang them to celebrate the harvest. People also sang them to celebrate weddings.

Psalm 126 provides a good example of celebration. “When Yahweh brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, ‘Yahweh has done great things for them.’ Yahweh has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy” (126:1-3).

This celebration psalm has a title reading “A song of ascents.” The title is a reference to this psalm as a song that the Israelites would sing on their journey “up” to Jerusalem (hence the word “ascents”).

E. Mourning

Psalm 137 is an excellent example of a psalm of mourning. It reads, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of Yahweh while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill....”

In this psalm, the writer laments the terrors and horrible memories of the conquering of Jerusalem, where the enemies took the Jewish infants and “dashed them against the rocks” (137:9). This psalm was not one of celebration and joy, but one of sadness and mourning.

F. Thanksgiving

A number of psalms are written in an expression of thanksgiving to the Lord. Some are written from the perception of personal thanks. Others reflect community thanks. Good examples are Psalm 30, 32, and 34 for personal thanks. Psalms 76 and 124 are excellent examples of community thanksgiving psalms.

G. Singing

A number of the psalms were meant for serious singing! In fact, several have melodies in the titles for use with the songs. Obviously, we do not have the melodies today. The psalms themselves, however, have been put to music more so than any other part of scripture.

Some psalms seem to have been written for singing back and forth (antiphonal singing). For example, Psalm 136 has “His love endures for ever” at the end of each verse. This was and still is a useful psalm for responsive singing (or reading!).

H. Education

A number of the Psalms have great value as educational pieces. This fact is true in a number of ways. Psalms like 78 conveyed historical events that were to be taught to successive generations. Also, there were acrostic psalms which many believe were written as tools to learn and use the alphabet. These were psalms where each succeeding verse would start with the next letter in the alphabet. An English equivalent might be:

A greater God could never be,
Best of all is Yahweh
Can anyone declare his wonders?
Dare anyone speak all hid might?
Each day proclaims his glory
Faithfulness dawns each morning.
[Etc.]

Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the bible, is written in this vein to the enth degree. In 119, eight verses start with each letter (verses 1-8 with the Hebrew equivalent of “A;” 9-18 with “B;” 19-24 with “C,” etc.).

Psalm 145 is an acrostic psalm. In the original Hebrew, each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Interestingly, if you have an English Bible over 50 years old, then you will find a difference between the psalm at the end of verse 13. All our copies of the Hebrew did not have the verse for the “n,” Hebrew letter “nun” (the letter between the “m” [men] and “s” [samek]). The Dead Sea Scrolls had a scroll of Psalms which included Psalm 145. That scroll has the missing “n” verse. The N.I.V., N.R.S.V., Good News Bible, and others now include this verse.

I. Prayer

A number of the Psalms are also written as prayers. These psalms take a wide approach to subject matter, as indeed prayer does. There are prayers for help, prayers for praise, prayers of thanks, prayers of desolation, prayers of desperation and many more.

For example, Psalm 109 has the psalmist asking, “O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent, for wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me...” (109:1-2). Similarly, Psalm 60 opens with the prayer, “You have rejected us, O God ... now restore us” (60:1).

In Psalm 63, the prayer is “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (63:1).

J. Historical

As mentioned in several contexts above, a number of the psalms recite historical deeds of God. The Great Hallel, Psalm 135, for example, recounts the events of Passover. “He struck down the firstborn of Egypt, the firstborn of men and animals. He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants” (135:8-9).

K. Prophetic

We read throughout scripture how a number of the psalms were prophetic in their words. Jesus himself indicated this when he said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44).

A good example of prophesy is found in Psalm 22 referenced above as a psalm of contemplation quoted by Jesus on the cross. A number of the verses are clearly prophetic about Christ on the cross.

The Gospel writers are quick to point out the prophecies of, for example, verse 18 where it reads “They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” Matthew and Luke both point out the fact that the clothes of Jesus were not split, but there was a casting of lots to see who would get them. John goes even further and points out “This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, ‘They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing’” (Jn. 19:24).

IV. Points for Home

All Christians should spend time in the Psalms. There is an immense amount of material to help with all phases of life. When we need a pick-me-up, when we need consolation, when we are jumping with joy, when we are seeking God, we will find help in the psalms over and over.

Bill Gothard gives an interesting approach to reading the psalms. He notes that there are 150 psalms, so reading five a day will result in reading the

book in a month. Gothard suggests a reading pattern where you read the psalm that is numbered the same as the day of the month, then add 30 for the next one, etc.

So, if you are reading on the first of the month, then you would read psalm 1, 31, 61, 91, and 121. If you are reading on the thirtieth, then you would read psalm 30, 60, 90, 120, and 150. The uncanny thing about this system is that the psalms thematically fit together incredibly well! A word of caution however – start reading early on the 29th of the month! Psalm 119 is read that day and it is a LONG DOOZIE!