



Wisdom, Faith & Nationalism

God at work in the world, creating, redeeming, restoring, protecting, are general themes throughout all the Psalms, particularly the psalms highlighted in week three. There was never a point when the Hebrew people singing and writing these psalms feel completely safe, there was just the shared voicing of hope that God would eventually rescue them from whatever challenges they were facing as a nation. In the meantime, they offer thanks for the gifts they have already received.

We also find ourselves bouncing around through time periods with these psalms. Language usage pointing to the eras when the psalms were written often contradicts the dating suggested in the titles or assigned writers at the beginning of most psalms, and that is where tradition and history tend to clash.

Wisdom Psalms - 1, 32, 37, 49, 73, 78, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133

The overarching theme of us vs. them is very obvious in these Wisdom Psalms. 'WE learned from our mistakes or always knew they were mistakes and are thus in right relationship with God, while THEY foolishly made choices that separate themselves from God and they will be destroyed soon enough'.

Psalms 73 strongly connects wealth with distance from God (i.e. sin). The author acknowledges jealousy of how much the wealthy have and wanting it for themselves, but then realizes the error of that thinking. The 'sanctuary of God' is the Temple, and once closer to God the obvious destruction of wealth is made clear. There is an ownership of behaviour and attitude that is in keeping with the

Deuteronomistic tradition whose central question was “what have we done wrong to separate ourselves from God”.

Psalm 78 reviews the early history of the Hebrew people, which suggests it was written during the Babylonian exile or just afterwards, where the Priestly class from Judah were collecting and composing the earliest stories of Genesis. This psalm is not simply about the wisdom of trusting and following God, but a history of faith lessons, giving them a through line as God’s people.

Psalm 119 is the longest in the entire psalter. It highlights the general teachings of the Torah and shows how grateful the writer is that these instructions were given so they can follow. It rambles a fair bit, and John Calvin considered it the most disjointed psalm of the lot. Others consider it the most boring because of its repetitive nature without any overt connecting line.

Royal Psalms - 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144

Psalm 2 appears as either a stand alone or as part of Psalm 1, depending on which ancient translation is used. As the first in the Royal Psalms, it very clearly highlights that God’s choice is the king of the Hebrews, and scoffs that other nations think they are that powerful. In v. 2 there is a reference to ‘anointed’ a word that has come to be translated “messiah”. That connection was probably picked up by the writer of Mathew who use words in 3:17 to identify Jesus as “my son, the beloved”, and stressed the Davidic heritage of Jesus. Those words used in Psalm 2 were not a prediction of Jesus, but rather a recognition of God’s support for the Hebrew king, identified as the “Greater son of David”.

There's Psalms that tell you things that nobody tells you - that you're fearfully and wonderfully made, that you're beautiful, that you have worth, basically.

Michaela Coel

Psalm 18 has the distinction of being written in two places. It also appears in 2 Samuel 22

Psalm 45 has a completely different tone, most likely that of a wedding psalm. The language is around the physical



Statue of King David by Adamo Tadolini (1788-1868), found at the base of the *Colonna dell' Immacolata* in Rome

presentation of both the king and his princess, the bride, and speaks of future sons as leaders of the world.

Psalm 101 has a different tone again. Most of the Royal Psalms speak of the king's righteousness and exploits, that are celebrated with God. In this psalm the king is speaking to God promising his behaviour will weed out the evils and honour the righteous. It is more quiet it tone.

Enthronement Psalms - 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99

The distinction between Royal Psalms and Enthronement Psalms is the focus of leadership. Royal Psalms celebrate the place, actions and responsibilities of David or the Davidic kings. Enthronement Psalms understand that the true ruler is God, and all the nations need to recognize that if they are to survive.

Psalm 47 tells all the nations that the God of Hebrew people is the God of the world. Scholars think this psalm was used during festivals reinforcing the totality of God's rule and that God chose to rule from Zion. Interestingly the people of other nations are not left on their own in this psalm, but are to be included in the 'people of the God of Abraham', meaning full citizens with the Hebrew people.

The remaining series were of psalms in this section present the same themes of praise, celebration and God being ruler over all nations. Although scholars can't agree on when the festival to celebrate God's rule over the world might have been celebrated, they are mostly in agreement that these psalms were used together in such a celebration, most likely in the Second Temple period.

Psalm 99 is the only one that enters new imagery: that of Moses, Aaron and Samuel being some of the initiators of this celebration through their own interactions with God.

Creation Psalms - 8, 19, 65, 104, 148

The psalms in this collection are songs of wonder. The authors were amazed by what God had set in motion, that all parts of nature interact perfectly, and that humans have been called to have 'dominion' (a word that means responsibility for, not dominance over), and privileged use over it all.

Psalm 8 gives a sense of awe. The author, looking around at creation is amazed at what they see, is overwhelmed that humans were part of this interrelated network. But more than that, line two reminds them that God not only made the world, but God protects what God made, and as the people of Israel, they are protected.

Psalm 19 adds the laws of Moses (Torah) to that of God's creation. The author sees no distinction between the natural world and the societal and legal structure in which the Hebrew people live. Both are considered perfect and orderly, and both are worthy of the same kind of awe and obedience.

The references to the laws of Moses, which were not fully composed until after the return from Babylonian exile, suggests this is an early Second Temple psalm, written after the Persians let the Hebrew people return to Judah and rebuild the temple. There is a sense of calm in the psalm, as well as a sense of deference or being unworthy of God's acceptance, and needing to approach God in humility asking for acceptance. Many preachers include this last verse of the psalm as their pre-sermon prayer.

Psalm 148 is part of the final five psalms that acts a doxology for the psalter. This could just as easily be placed in the psalms of worship we reviewed in week two. If we look at Psalms as one long narrative of struggle and hope, these finally five psalms are the conclusion that shows hope was not misplaced, that the God of the world is also the God of the Hebrew people.

Trust Psalms - 23, 91, 121, 125, 131

The first three psalms identified as Trust Psalms contain some of the most recognizable language in the psalter. Psalm 23 is spoken at almost every funeral and perhaps the one psalm heard regularly by those outside the Jewish and Christian traditions. Psalm 91 has been set to music as the beautiful "On Eagle's Wings", and Psalm 121 opens with the lines that Mother Abbess quoted to Maria in the Sound of Music, showing once again how psalms cut across cultural lines in the most interesting ways.

The imagery in Psalm 23 shifts for the shepherd who cares for and guides their sheep to a host who demonstrates protection of their guest to their enemies, and provides for their care once the enemies have received the message. With both images the central figure of the psalm knows they are taken care of completely even though they know threats are all around.

Psalm 121 is a journeying song as they approach the Temple. The mention of keeping eyes on the hills is not about joyfully approaching Jerusalem, but rather the wariness that until they are safely inside the city they are vulnerable to bandits or enemies who might attack. These trust psalms hold a realism that while they can trust in God, the world is still very dangerous and on their own they are not able to protect themselves.



A Babylonian Harp in the Hebrew Music Museum

Psalm 131 is one of the shorter psalms and shows female images of God as mother holding her young child near as it transitions to more independence. There are a number of female images of the divine in the wisdom books showing a rich understanding of their relationship with God.

Zionist Psalms - 46, 48, 76, 84, 122

Zion is often connected to Jerusalem, but it is more about the people than a specific city. These psalms are from various times of occupation and peace, showing that Zion is more of a concept rather than something physical.

Psalm 48 was most likely written in response to the Assyrian invasion of Judah being stopped at the border of Israel. There is a strong sense that due to God living in the Temple, Jerusalem was spared and would always be spared.

Psalm 76 speaks to a different victory, most likely before the assault of the Assyrians on the northern kingdom because both Israel and Judah are mentioned in the parallel stanza structure, as are Salem and Zion. Interestingly, many scholars and tradition holds these places are both references to Jerusalem, but they could point to an open question as to where the central worship really was held prior to the separation of the two kingdoms. We assume Jerusalem because that was the site of the Second Temple, but no archeological digs have been allowed so we can't confirm that the First Temple really stood in the same place.

Psalm 122 is another journeying psalm, most likely from the Second Temple period. Jerusalem is properly named and there is celebration as they approach the Temple, not the worry about what might happen that we see in the Trust Psalms. Scholars believe this psalm was written for festival pilgrimages.

The Lord's my shepherd; I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie
in pastures green; he leadeth me
the quiet waters by.
He leadeth me, he leadeth me
the quiet waters by.