



An Anatomy of the Soul

"I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, An Anatomy of the Soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men (sic.) are wont to be agitated."

John Calvin in his introduction to the Psalms, 1557

The Book of Psalms has often been called the Songbook of the Temple, as its use was primarily for worship. They were written somewhere between 1000 - 200 BCE, and used heavily during the First and Second Temple periods of 600 BCE - 70 CE. Although connected with the temple, they found their way into post-temple worship for both Jewish and Christian believers. For Muslims, the Psalms are seen as part of God's revelation, and though they don't sing or pray them like their Abrahamic siblings, they do recognize the value of Psalms in shared worship and connections between the three traditions.

The Psalms are a collection of 150 poems that cover both joy and sadness experienced by the Hebrew people, whether personally or collectively. Some were strictly praise songs, some laments, others songs for pilgrimages. They represented the lived experiences of the people and their relationship with God, and unlike the other books in the Bible where God spoke to the people or there are conversations between God and people, the entirety of Psalms is people addressing God.

The book of Psalms is not the only place where Hebrew poetry is found in the Bible: the Songs of Deborah, Moses, and Hannah also follow the style of worshipping God through poetry and praise. The distinction is that the Book of Psalms is a concentrated place of worship songs that speak to the general human condition, not poetic interpretations of stories already written in prose.

The word “psalms” comes from the Greek word *Psalmos*, meaning ‘song sung to a harp’. That is a translation from the Hebrew word *psallein*, meaning “play a stringed instrument”. These poems were meant to be sung in worship, private or corporate. To underscore that reality Psalm 45 begins with a note to the leader “according to Lilies”, which was probably a tune familiar at the time but since lost to us.



In the Jewish tradition, the Book of Psalms (*Tehillim*, ‘book of praises’) is the first book in the third part of the Bible, known as The Writings (*Ketuvim*). These include all the books read for worship and celebrations of holy days, including Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, as well as the novels of Esther, Ruth and Job.

Psalms are still being written today by communities of faith.

Importance of recognizing the poetry

The poetry used in the Psalms is an ancient style of Hebrew poetry. Translations into English can often be challenging since they don’t often carry over the puns that were a natural part of Hebrew writing and are often lost on readers in a different language. Additionally there are many cultural and geographical references that might not be obvious. However, the simplicity of

the imagery and the lack of rhyming couplets makes translation easy in other regards. No matter what language the Psalms are translated into, they carry the richness of the message of God being present in our lives, both the good times and the bad.

Although the Psalms are accredited to King David, most scholars agree that that was more a courtesy than a statement of actual composition. It was common in ancient times to accredit something of significance to a person of cultural importance. This is why the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures are accredited to Moses, and the majority of letters in the Christian scriptures are accredited to Paul.

It could well be entitle a “Little Bible” since everything contained in the entire Bible is beautifully and briefly comprehended and compacted into the book of Psalms.

MARTIN LUTHER

Much of Hebrew poetry includes what is known as parallelism, which means two lines give the same imagery, with the second expounding on the first. Several examples of this can be seen in Psalm 34:

- Keep your tongue from evil/and your lips from speaking deceit (v. 13)
- He keeps all their bones/not one of them will be broken (v. 20)
- Evil brings death to the wicked/and those who hate the righteous will be condemned (v. 21)

Another difference between modern understandings of poetry and the ancient Hebrew style, is that the important message in the Psalm is in the middle, not the end. So in Psalm 23, the most significant message is “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me”. In the longer Psalm 94, the significant message is found in v. 14 “For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage”.

Structure of the Book of Psalms

Trying to find structure in the Psalms is difficult, as these poems were written, added to, changed and moved around the psalter for centuries before the final version somewhere around the year 100 CE. Since we have no documents dating to that time in history, this is the best guess of the majority of scholars (most biblical writings known today date to translations from the 4th century CE onward).

The Book of Psalms is divided into five sections, each with their own doxology except the last section where Psalm 150 is a doxology for the entire book. There is some suggestion that these five segments were to be a parallel with the first five books of the Bible: The five books of Moses, the greatest prophet, and the five books of David, the greatest king.

The sections are as follows:

- 1-41: This includes the introduction to the psalter, thoughts on ethics and worship, and psalms from individuals giving voice to distress with the conviction that God will save them
- 42-72: This collection is primarily communal and includes most of what are known as ‘historical’ psalms connected with specific Biblical events and people
- 73-89: A darker book asking God where there is justice and why God is not saving the people as promised to David
- 90-106: As a response to the themes in book three, this book assures people God was active in Israel long before David was king, and will continue to be active long after they are gone

- 107-150: The final book is one of celebration that God is still present with the people and does answer prayers, pilgrimage prayer for approaching Jerusalem, and gives us the word “Hallelujah”, which is a mash of “Hallel” (praise) and “Yah” (shortened form of Yahweh or God)

With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a several scrolls of the psalter were found that ascribed the psalms to specific people or groups of people. Scholars agree these claims of authorship could also be translated as statements of dedication, written for the person/groups rather than by them. In that vein, Psalms can be organized as follows:

Davidic Collection: 3-41, 51-72, 138-145 (written by or dedicated to King David)

Korahite Collection: 42-49, 84-85, 87-88 (sons of Korah who lived in southern Judah and were possibly contemporaneous with Samuel)

Elohistic Collection: 42-83 (dating back to the 9th century BCE, connected with several parts of the first four books of the Torah, including the first creation story in Genesis; the tradition believed to have started in the northern kingdom of Israel, but found a home in Judah through refugees that fled the Assyrian invasion)

Asaphite Collection: 73-83 (Asaphite family were Levites who were commissioned by David to lead worship in the first temple, 10th-6th century BCE)

Songs of Ascents: 120-134 (believed to be written by pilgrims approaching Jerusalem, heavy emphasis on worship and journeying)

I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.

C S LEWIS ON PSALM 19



And finally Psalms can be organized by genres. They cover a wide array of human emotions, often opening with petitions to God and closing with praise and gratitude that God heard and answered their prayers.

Themes include:

- Laments, both personal and corporate
- Thanksgiving
- Festival songs, hymns and liturgies
- Wisdom
- Trust
- About the Torah, specifically laws of Moses

We will be reviewing the genres for this study.