



psalms

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Genre Of Poetry (Psalms)

READING HEBREW POETRY

Like contemporary poetry and the poems you may have studied in school, Hebrew poetry uses figurative language. But beyond that, it has a few other distinctive qualities that will help you to read it precisely and fruitfully.

Remember, firstly, that you read the Psalms *in translation* from ancient Hebrew, the language the Psalmist wrote them in. Certain nuances are always lost in translation, but all that is necessary for our instruction, and much that lends itself to pure poetic enjoyment, is retained in a good translation.

Remember that these words were originally set to music and sung by a congregation. They are really ancient hymns. Here are a few other distinctive features of Hebrew poetry that will help you understand the Psalms:

Motifs:

A motif is an idea or theme that occurs again and again in a piece of art. Like the theme melody in a classic symphony, there are a number of basic themes that recur throughout the Psalms:

Praise: “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! **2** I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.” (Psalm 146:1-2)

Lament: “In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. **4** Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul.” (Psalm 142: 3b-4)

Thanksgiving: “We give thanks to you, O God; we give thanks, for your name is near. We recount your wondrous deeds.” (Psalm 75:1)

Wisdom: “It is well with the man who deals generously and lends; who conducts his affairs with justice. **6** For the righteous will never be moved; he will be remembered forever.” (Psalm 112: 5-6)

Confessions of Trust: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” (Psalm 23:6)

Royal Psalms: These are psalms about God’s anointed king, and address “the spiritual role of kings in the worship of Yahweh”. “O Lord, save the king! May he answer us when we call.” (Psalm 20:9)

Pilgrim Songs (sometimes called “Songs of Ascent”): a group of psalms (psalms 120-134) sung by pilgrims going to up to Jerusalem for major festivals. “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’ **2** Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!” (Psalm 122:1-2)

Parallelism: *The main distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry.*

Think of parallelism as repetition or echo of words, used for effect; it has even been called “thought rhyme”. The parallelism in Hebrew poetry, then, is not a repetition of sounds or rhythms, but of *ideas*. Scholars have identified many different kinds of parallelism in Hebrew poetry. When reading the Psalms translated into English, here are some you will encounter:

Synonymous parallelism: a repetition or echo of the *same* idea in the *same* verse:

“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;” Psalm 1:5

The two ideas mean the same thing, pretty much. The rephrasing of the same idea with different words emphasizes it.

Antithetical parallelism: two *opposing* ideas in a single verse, one following the other: “...for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” Psalm 1:6

Progressive Parallelism:

a) Stair-like: A building-up of several ideas to create a complete picture: “Blessed *is* the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;” Psalm 1:1 NKJV

b) Climactic: The second idea in the verse not only repeats the first, but *expands* on it: “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!” Psalm 148:1. Can you hear the rising emotion and exaltation invoked by the repetition and the adding of detail to the repetition?

External parallelism: Synonymous or antithetical ideas that occur, not within a single verse, but that carry over *more than one* verse: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. **4** The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.” Psalm 1:3-4

This helps the poet build a detailed picture, in this case an extended metaphor that describes the established believer.

HELPFUL LINKS

http://www.wciu.edu/docs/resources/Course2_readerGC2_C2P_conventions_hebrew_poetry.pdf
<http://executableoutlines.com>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Psalms
<http://www.usefulcharts.com/religion/types-of-psalms.html>

Approaching Poetry: An encouragement

First of all, trust that The Poem likes you. The Poem wants you to understand it.

All the things that scare you away from The Poem or make you feel that you don't "get" poetry can, with the most basic effort, be learned.

Likely you already know most of the things you need to know. You already know, for example, what figurative language is.

For example: Jesus said: "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture." (John 10:9)

No sane person reads that and thinks that Jesus was saying that he was a series of wooden planks bound together and hung in a doorway. It is understood to be a picture of certain qualities of Jesus' character and purpose. Literary types call this a metaphor, the comparing of two things made by saying one thing is the other thing.

Think of poetic language as a sort of shorthand. Instead of saying "I am the one you must believe in, in order to pass from the kingdom of the dead to the kingdom of the living," he says, "I am the door."

Ah, a door. We already know about doors. We don't need a lengthy explanation: we know!

All our minds are created, to one degree or another, to make these connections. We make them all the time. A friend spends her winters in Palm Springs: you call her a "snowbird". You turn to a frightened person in the dentist's waiting room and say "It's okay; we're all in the same boat." Something comes easily to you and you say "That was a piece of cake!" Your mind is doing the same thing a poet's does: connecting two unconnected things by recognizing common qualities between them.

The fact is that we couldn't communicate properly with one another at all without this kind of thing. You try going one day without a single figurative expression. No sayings, no word pictures, no comparisons. I'll bet you can't do it.

A poet takes this essential quality of language and intensifies and structures it, to say things impossible to say without it. You could go on all day (and there are theologians who do) about the merciful, providential and powerful aspects of God's character. Or you could just say "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." (Psalm 23)

A picture is worth a thousand words – even a picture made with words.

Study 1: Psalm 2

1 Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
2 The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
3 “Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”

4 He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
6 “As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”

7 I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
9 You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
11 Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
12 Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

1. As you begin your prep, pray the psalm aloud, slowly.

2. Note repeated words, phrases or ideas?

3. Who is talking to whom in the psalm? Notice if and when it changes. What would you say is the tone or mood of the psalm?

4. Notice the imagery or metaphors used. Spend some time paying attention to it/them and thinking through what they indicate.

5. Are there turning points in the psalm? What changes?

6. What does the psalm reveal about:

- God?

- His people?

- Life in this world?

7. Does the psalm point forward to Jesus? Is the gospel foreshadowed in some way?

8. What response is the Psalmist calling us to make? How does it challenge or confirm your understanding?

9. Meditate on the whole psalm, or choose a verse or two, and spend some time in prayer.

Study 2: Psalm 29

A PSALM OF DAVID

- 1** Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2** Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.

- 3** The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over many waters.
- 4** The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

- 5** The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- 6** He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

- 7** The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- 8** The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

- 9** The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

- 10** The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- 11** May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

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Study 3: Psalm 46

TO THE CHOIRMASTER. OF THE SONS OF KORAH. ACCORDING TO ALAMOTH. A SONG.

- 1** God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- 2** Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah
- 4** There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- 5** God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
- 6** The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- 7** The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah
- 8** Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.
- 9** He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.
- 10** "Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!"
- 11** The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

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Study 4: Psalm 79

A PSALM OF ASAPH

1 O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.

2 They have given the bodies of your servants
to the birds of the heavens for food,
the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth.

3 They have poured out their blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there was no one to bury them.

4 We have become a taunt to our neighbours,
mocked and derided by those around us.

5 How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?
Will your jealousy burn like fire?

6 Pour out your anger on the nations
that do not know you,
and on the kingdoms
that do not call upon your name!

7 For they have devoured Jacob
and laid waste his habitation.

8 Do not remember against us our former iniquities;
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,
for we are brought very low.

9 Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us, and atone for our sins,
for your name's sake!

10 Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?"

Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants
be known among the nations before our eyes!

11 Let the groans of the prisoners come before you;
according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die!

12 Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbours
the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord!

13 But we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
will give thanks to you forever;
from generation to generation we will recount your praise.

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Study 5: Psalm 84

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO THE GITTITH. A PSALM OF THE SONS OF KORAH.

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!

2 My soul longs, yes, faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

3 Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.

4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house,
ever singing your praise! Selah

5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

6 As they go through the Valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

7 They go from strength to strength;
each one appears before God in Zion.

8 O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah

9 Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed!

10 For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

12 O LORD of hosts,
blessed is the one who trusts in you!

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Study 6: Psalm 96

- 1** Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
- 2** Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 3** Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
- 4** For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.
- 5** For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
- 6** Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- 7** Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
- 8** Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
- 9** Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!
- 10** Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."
- 11** Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
- 12** let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- 13** before the LORD, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

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Study 7: Psalm 145

A SONG OF PRAISE. OF DAVID.

1 I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.

2 Every day I will bless you
and praise your name forever and ever.

3 Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable.

4 One generation shall commend your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.

5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

6 They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds,
and I will declare your greatness.

7 They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

8 The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

9 The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.

10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,
and all your saints shall bless you!

11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom
and tell of your power,

12 to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

[The LORD is faithful in all his words
and kind in all his works.]

14 The LORD upholds all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.

15 The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.

16 You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.

17 The LORD is righteous in all his ways
and kind in all his works.

18 The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.

19 He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;
he also hears their cry and saves them.

20 The LORD preserves all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.

21 My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,
and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever

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