

Psalms

The book of Psalms is often referred to as the songbook or prayer-book of the Bible. Its poetry has spoken to faithful people over millennia, as all aspects of human life find expression in its verses. Most scholars believe that the psalms contained were used in some form of corporate worship by the faithful to express praise, lament, and thanksgiving. While we no longer have the music associated with the psalms, there are hints of tune titles, pauses and repeats in the texts themselves – all of which point to the book of Psalms as a prayer-book, hymnbook. The book of Psalms comes from all periods in Israel's history and the final form of the book does not come together perhaps until after the time of Jesus. While there are psalms that David probably wrote, the consensus is that he did not write all the psalms as they reflect years of Israel's faithful worship.

While we do not have the music associated with the psalms, there are certain features of the psalms that help us listen to them, understand them and appreciate them. First is the fact that they are poetry and in reading poetry we need to pay attention to how Hebrew poetry works. For English poetry rhyme and meter (think Shakespeare's iambic pentameter) are important characteristics. While they are part of Hebrew poetry, the primary vehicle of expression in Hebrew poetry is called, parallelism. The simplest way to describe parallelism is say something once, then say it again in a slightly different way to add nuance and highlight what has been said. This can be seen in the first few lines of the first psalm:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers; (1:1)

Notice after the initial introduction of "Happy are those", there are three statements that are in parallel with each other. Each statement has a word about walking/sitting (follow, take, sit), followed by a word that describes where one might walk/sit (advice, path, seat) and then concluded with three words for sinners (wicked, sinners, scoffers). Each parallel line builds upon the imagery of the previous one, so that at the end we see that we are talking not simply about following the advice of the wicked, but an entire way of life. In reading throughout the Psalms, it is helpful to look for this parallel pattern and notice how it is used, sometimes reversed and sometimes broken to bring meaning.

The second is to think of this poetry much like we do in English; that there are particular forms for psalms. Just like a sonnet is different than a limerick, there are forms that the psalms in the book of Psalms follow. There are psalms of praise that celebrate God's faithfulness like Psalm 150, psalms of lament that mourn the brokenness of our lives and world like Psalm 13, and psalms of thanksgiving that give thanks for God's saving action like Psalm 136. While the particularities of these forms are fuller than this one-page summary can provide, a good bible commentary will point out how the writers of the Psalms use the forms to communicate, and at times break with the form to provide more meaning.

Finally, the parallelism and forms of the psalms have been helpfully classified by Walter Brueggemann into a pattern that reflects our very lives. Brueggemann talks about three main types of psalms – psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation and psalms of reorientation. In this schema, psalms of orientation are the songs we sing (prayers we pray) when life is going well and makes sense, offering our praise to God. When life inevitably goes wrong and does not make sense, we have psalms of disorientation that bring as he says "a formfulness to grief", giving us words to speak when we don't have them to speak. Finally, psalms of re-orientation are for those times when we have moved through

