

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 38

Introduction to Psalms With a Nod to Psalm 145

Almost everyone who took high school English remembers studying poetry. My freshman year we had Miss Rena Noack for English. Our course was a Hodgepodge of literature, grammar, creative writing, and poetry.

Before Miss Noack, my poetry knowledge was fairly limited. Nursery rhymes and limericks might be considered poetry, but beyond that I had Mom's recitation of "The Spider and the Fly," Kathryn's Christmas renditions of "Twas the Night Before Christmas," and Dad's variations on "Roses are Red, Violets are Blue..." Miss Noack's class opened the world of Shakespeare's sonnets, of iambic pentameter, and various rhyming schemes. She introduced us to different cultures as we learned the syllabic counting of Japanese Haiku.

Certain aspects of poetry went beyond basic rhyming or syllable counting. Poetry carried an appeal for its sound and flow of the words. Miss Noack assigned exercises where we tried to capture various styles and techniques. The allure of alliteration altered the approach of several poetic protégés. (Okay, at the risk of stating the obvious, I was never one of them!) Outside of English classes, my life was not too attuned to poetry (unless you count my penchant for listening to Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen, both strong poets who happen to sing their poetry), until I began studying foreign languages.

During my study of Greek and Latin, we learned the classic elements of poetry. In Greek class, we also learned the root of our word "poem."¹ In Hebrew studies, I took a class on Old Testament poetry under Professor Clyde Miller. In this class, we translated a number of Psalms and Proverbs concentrating our focus on the various forms and elements of Hebrew poetry. This Hebrew class opened my eyes to ancient Semitic forms of poetry that were quite distinct from certain aspects of Western poetry, while other aspects were the same.

HEBREW POETRY

Every Hebrew word, with a few rare exceptions, has a standard set of endings that are attached to a root. For example, these endings will vary when a noun is masculine or feminine, singular or plural. Some endings indicate a pronoun that

¹ Our words "poem" and "poet/poetry" come from the Greek *poieo* (ποιέω) meaning "I make" or "I form."

attaches to a verb. Some indicate a direct object. There are dozens of these endings, but most common ones occur over and over, so that Hebrew words are not very distinct in the sounds that end words. Not surprisingly, ancient Hebrew poetry never concerned itself with rhyming words. It just does not work well with the language. Instead, Hebrew poetry finds its expressions in other ways, including what Randall Price calls, rhyming “ideas.”

Form and flow dictate significant aspects of Hebrew poetry. There are structures of parallelism, which will get greater focus later in this lesson, that help establish nuances of meaning. Some Hebrew psalms are built around the alphabet in an acrostic fashion (more on this later as well). Chiasms² are a tool we have seen in earlier lessons in narrative materials that structure passages in such a way as to make them easier to remember, listen to, and see the mid-point as a focus of meaning. This same chiasm was used in poetic Psalms for the same reasons. An example of a chiastic Psalm is Psalm 67. We can look at it and see that it builds toward a mid-point of emphasis and then returns in reverse thought to its beginning:

- v. 1 May God be gracious to us and bless us
 and make his face to shine upon us,

- v. 2 That your way may be known on earth,
 your saving power among all nations.

- v. 3 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all
 the peoples praise you!

- v. 4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
 for you judge the people with equity and
 guide the nations upon the earth.

- v. 5 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all
 the peoples praise you!

- v. 6 The earth has yielded its increase; God,
 our God, shall bless us.

- v. 7 God shall bless us; let all the ends of the
 earth fear him!

² A “chiasm” is a structured presentation where phrases or passages link together building to a point and then reversing in a symmetrical way to the first link. So the first link might be point A, then point B, then point C. This would be followed by a thought that mirrors or recalls Point B and finally point A.

From this chiasm, emphasis is drawn to the center verse four, calling on all nations to honor God for his justice and guidance. God is not simply the God of Israel, but his reach goes into the very corners of the earth and its people. People should respond accordingly.

Going beyond the structure and form of Hebrew poetry, the word choice is also significant. Here, we have many of today's poetic conventions present in the Hebrew Psalms. Word play and alliteration are quite common. In Psalm 70, for example, we read a chiastic Psalm that adds elements of pun and word play for emphasis:

- v. 1 Make haste, O God, to deliver me!
 O LORD, make haste to help me!
- v. 2-3 Let them be put to shame and confusion who seek my life! Let them
 be turned back and brought to dishonor who delight in my hurt! Let
 them turn back because of their shame who say, "Aha, Aha!"
- v. 4 May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you! May those
 who love your salvation say evermore, "God is great!"
- v. 5 But I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my
 help and deliverer, O LORD, do not delay!

Here one can see the chiasm and its emphasis on contrasting those who say, "Aha!" with those who say, "God is great!" The word play, however, requires a Hebrew text. In verse five, the Hebrew would sound like, "*vah-ani ani vah-eyyon.*" The two "*ani*" sounds are different words spelled with different letters, even though they sound the same.³ These sounds emphasize the desperate state of the Psalmist. The second word with the *ani* sound really means the same thing as the word translated "needy," but by putting these words all together the emphasis is strong! This Psalmist is hurting and badly in need of God's help! Several other aspects of the word play are evident even in the English. Verse one cries out for God to make haste (twice), a request repeated in verse five with the added "do not delay!" There is the word play noted above about the two groups who "say" different things (verses three and four). There is also word play among those who "seek" the life of the Psalmist versus those who "seek" God (verses two and four).

³ The Hebrew reads: **וְאֲנִי עָנִי**

In our study of the Psalms, we will see poetic devices, but we do not study them simply for the scholastic knowledge of ancient near eastern writing. The Psalms are majestic and beautiful pieces of literary accomplishment, and they appeal to the sense and mind. Yet, the real appeal that we want to find is in the way the Psalms minister to the reader, both individually and corporately. The goal for these lessons is to engage the Psalms in ways that heighten the appreciation and draw the reader into greater personal interaction with each Psalm. For in the Psalms we find a myriad of resources. There are Psalms that lead the worshipper,⁴ inspire the dejected,⁵ lift up the downtrodden and heal the wounded,⁶ draw the lonely into fellowship⁷ and give peace and calm to the weeping,⁸ give voice to the rejoicing and music to the traveler. There are Psalms that help express the anger of the wronged,⁹ confess the guilt of the sinner,¹⁰ and that bestow forgiveness on the repentant.¹¹ Psalms speak faith to the doubting¹² and direction to the lost.¹³

Jesus is found in the Psalms.¹⁴ Psalms are quoted in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament book. In the Psalms, we read of the character of God,¹⁵ and his actions among humanity. The Psalms are well worth a lifetime of study, yet our limitations of this class will restrict this study to a handful of lessons.

Keeping with this realization, our approach will be to introduce the Psalms as poems in this first lesson. The next two lessons will feature guest speakers teaching on significant Psalms in their lives. Then, I will return to consider the Psalms in light of their purposes and historical development. We will also

⁴ See, e.g., Psalm 145.

⁵ See, e.g., Psalm 42 and 43.

⁶ See, e.g., Psalm 40.

⁷ See, e.g., Psalm 142.

⁸ See, e.g., Psalm 131.

⁹ See, e.g., Psalm 137.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Psalm 51.

¹¹ See, e.g., Psalm 32.

¹² See, e.g., Psalm 27.

¹³ See, e.g., Psalm 120 and 121.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Psalm 22.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Psalm 19.

consider some of the obscure words found in some Psalms – *Selah* – and other unusual features.

PARALLELISM

Lessons on the Psalms often begin with examination of parallel structures so commonly found in the verses. These structures are a key to understanding nuances of meaning beyond the first simple reading of a Psalm. By parallelism, scholars are referring to clauses or phrases where a degree of repetition is found. This repetition heightens the meaning of the Psalms in at least two ways. First, there is typically a nuanced difference in the word choice that gives an internal emphasis. For example, Psalm 104:33 reads,

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

Looking at these two clauses one can see the repetition that earns the label “parallelism.” Both phrases begin with, “I will sing.” Both phrases ascribe the songs as sung to Deity. Both phrases end with the idea that the singing will continue throughout the Psalmist’s life. The distinctions of these two phrases are where the nuanced meanings are found. In the first phrase, the Psalmist sings to Yahweh (the “LORD”). It is the added nuance of the second phrase that personalizes Yahweh as “*my God*.” The Psalmist does not simply sing to Yahweh as the supreme Lord; he sings to Yahweh as his personal Lord and God. This prompts the added word that the song is one of “praise.” The Hebrew makes this parallelism even more graphic. The verse is six simple words, three in each phrase:

1 I will sing **2** to Yahweh **3** While I have life

1 I will sing praises **2** to my God **3** While I still am

Many people might lose the parallelism and simply opt for word economy by writing, “I will sing praise to the Lord, my God, as long as I am alive.” That might convey most of the ideas set out above, but it would lose a critical second way that parallelism heightens meanings of Psalms. The nuance produced in a parallel structuring forces the reader to think and ponder. It makes the Psalm appropriate for thoughtful meditation and personalizing as one peels back the layers of thought contained within. In this sense, Geoffrey Grogan writes,

Truth presented in parallelism demands not just acceptance but reflection.¹⁶

More and more, the careful reader of the Psalms will see these parallel structures not as simple redundancies, but as literary efforts to deliver emphasis. A number of scholars have tried to divide the various kinds of parallelisms into classifications. Early efforts to categorize parallelisms often resulted in three categories: “synonymous,” “antithetical,” and “synthetic.” These categories did not seem to capture the full range of Hebrew parallelism, and so later scholars began adding newer types. For example “crossed parallelism,” “climactic parallelism,” and “step” or “staircase parallelism” became normative terms.¹⁷

One can readily see how these terms take their meaning by looking at various verses. Climactic parallelism is the term applied to passages like Psalm 29:1-2 where the parallel structure builds up to a climactic final phrase:

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.

On the final line, the change in parallel structures draws the emphasis like a crashing wave. Hence the term, “climactic parallelism.” Step parallelism also readily displays the genesis of its name. If one looks at a classic example in Psalm 94:1. Notice the way that the second part of the first phrase becomes the step for the first part of the second phrase:

O LORD, God of vengeance,
O God of vengeance, shine forth!

Precise categorization does not work well, because these are not categories that were forms of the Psalmists. They are efforts of current scholars to explain and analyze the works from thousands of years ago. For this reason, I tend to use the term “nuanced parallelism,” because the key is the nuanced meaning or emphasis

¹⁶ Grogan, Geoffrey, *Psalms*, (Eerdmans 2008), at 6.

¹⁷ Normative terms vary by author and time of writing. Most general reviews of the Psalms will give various listings of the types of parallelism, but each often differs from the other, depending upon the perspective of the author. The Grogan text cited earlier contains his explanations of divisions on pages 5ff. Compare that to Hunter, Alastair, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, (T&T Clark 2008), at 12ff.

that is found by the structure used, whether it is classified as one type or another. A good example is the parallel structure in Psalm 18:25-26. To understand it, first consider Psalm 18:27, which most scholars would consider “antithetical parallelism.”

For you save a humble people,
But the haughty eyes you bring down

Questions about labeling this passage are easily answered. The passage presents two opposites in contrast, hence it is what scholars label “antithetical parallelism.” In contrast are the humble people from those with haughty eyes. The humble God saves; the haughty he brings down. The two prior verses do not so neatly fit into the category of “antithetical parallelism.” Rather, they seem to combine elements of climactic parallelism with synonymous parallelism in one verse and then antithetical parallelism in the next. Consider verses 25 and 26:

25 With the merciful you show yourself merciful;
With the blameless man you show yourself blameless;
26 With the purified you show yourself pure
And with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous

Reading carefully shows verse 25 is synonymous, nuancing the idea that a merciful man is a blameless man. The idea continues into verse 26 where the merciful or blameless man is also termed “pure.” Then in a climactic fashion, or an antithetical fashion if focusing simply on the parallelism of verse 26, we have the crooked man. Aside from wedging this passage into a certain classification, we can see the nuance simply by working through its structures.

Searching these verses, one sees God is understood as good by those who are good (merciful/blameless/pure), yet to those who are crooked, and by implication not merciful, not blameless, impure, God seems to be unmerciful, properly blamed, and impure.¹⁸ Most will see this in their interactions with folks who repeatedly complain about God in ways that actually reflect their own shortcomings.

¹⁸ Paul expressed a related idea in Titus 1:15-16, “To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.”

CONCLUSION

This introductory lesson will hopefully start us thinking about careful reading of the Psalms. The Psalms are not simply expressions of the heart and mind, but they are also tools of teaching. They will inspire as they increase one's understanding of God and man. The insights that can come from deliberative chewing on the messages within the simplest of verses, heightens the appreciation that God has used many different literary tools to present his revelation to humanity. Consider in this light the parallel structures of the Hebrew poem. This was not a Hebrew invention. It was not something that happened simply in the Bible. God was speaking in the language and forms of the day, but infusing those forms with his eternal message, with his divine revelation.

Ugarit was a city that was about 280 miles north of Jerusalem (modern Ras Shamra, Syria). Over the last century, a good bit of exploration has produced numerous clay tablets written hundreds of years before King David, even before Moses. These tablets were written in a language scholars term "Ugaritic." The language is from the same family of languages as Hebrew ("Semitic" languages). Translations of these tablets have produced numerous works of poetry that feature the same types of parallelism we read in the Bible.¹⁹ The Psalms and other poetic passages in Scripture assure us once again that God uses the mediums of our language and our experience to offer his eternal truths and minister in our lives. The goal for us in the 21st century is to use our minds and resources first to understand what God said in the context of history, to only then apply it in our own lives. In the case of the Psalms, small things like nuanced parallelism help us discover and more fully appreciate his divine revelation.

Various Psalms then begin to take on new life as they become more intimate and personal. Ultimately, the Psalms are for use and to use them best, we need to find the personal touch that comes from contemplation and study. That is our goal over the next few weeks.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"I will sing to the LORD...I will sing praise to my God"* (Psalm 104:33).

While we can see this passage pointing us to sing to the Lord as a personal God, it does not necessarily detail to us how to do it! Let me make a couple of suggestions. First, always look for those opportunities in worship service to sing

¹⁹ Parker, Simon, "The Literatures of Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Phoenicia: An Overview," in Sasson, Jack, ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, (Hendrickson 2000), at 2400ff.

to the Lord, not simply about him. When we have songs that are directed to God, realize that you have an opportunity to do the very thing the Psalmist longs for. Make a conscious effort to sing *to* God. Second, the Psalms themselves are songs. The word “Psalms” comes from the Latin title for the book (*Liber Psalmorum*). The Latin is related to the Greek word *psalmos*, which means “playing strings.” It is the Greek word used by the Jewish translators of Scripture into Greek (the “Septuagint”) when they were translating the Hebrew word *mizmor* (meaning “stringed instruments” which in the title of various Psalms. In other words, the Psalms are songs! Study and read the Psalms out loud. This is another way to “sing” to the Lord.

2. “*The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’*” (Ps. 110:1).

Xavier Glimm, in his notes on the letter of Saint Clement of Rome to the Corinthians (which was written roughly the same time as John’s Revelation) points to this Psalm passage as a key to understanding that the early church collected Messianic statements from the Psalms and Old Testament to bear witness to Christ.²⁰ Christ himself was deeply adept at using the Psalms for comfort as well as to testify to his role in mankind’s salvation. On the cross Jesus cries out the opening words from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groanings?” (Matt. 27:46; Mk 15:34). Scripture does not record Jesus reciting the entire Psalm from the cross, and it seems he would never have had the breath and energy to do so. Yet by reading the Psalm in its entirety, we have the benefit of knowing how it ends. This is the Psalm that recounts the enemies all around, the enemies having “pierced my hands and feet” (v.16), yet no bones are broken (v. 17). This Psalm recites that the enemies “divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots” (v. 18). The Psalm draws to a close noting that future generations will proclaim the righteousness of the Lord and the chosen one. The Psalm promises “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord” (v. 27). These Psalms carry a weight that goes beyond the moment of their composition. They are worthy of the church’s study and prayer as they provide insight into the nature and work of God!

²⁰ Glimm, Francis Xavier, *The Apostolic Fathers* (CIMA Publishing 1946), v. 1, at 38.

3. *“With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless...blameless; with the purified... pure; and with the crooked...torturous”* (Ps. 18:25-26).

You and I can learn a careful lesson from this passage. How do you perceive God? Does God seem crooked and mean, a torturer who inflicts pain on people? Does God seem merciful as one who rescues people from the pain of the world, holding them close? God will show himself based upon the traits we are living. If we are having trouble seeing God as reflected in the life of Christ, then we need to spend time examining our own choices and actions. Let us seek his righteousness and holiness, seeking to forgive others and live at peace. As we do so, we will see God unfold his loving character to us and in us!

WANT MORE?

Zeroing in on the Psalms is a great opportunity to grow in wisdom and closeness with God. Toward that end, we suggest several options for those who want more out of this set of lessons. First, start reading the Psalms afresh and make a note in your Bible for each Psalm. This note should be a time or purpose where the Psalm speaks to you. For example, Psalm 1 might carry the note, “Encouragement for living right.” Second, look again at this written lesson. It is sub-labeled a nod to Psalm 145. Can you figure out why? If so, email us at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com and tell us your conclusion!