**For Musicians & Clergy: Scripture**

**Psalms: Poetry at its Best**

**BY JOHN KSSELMAN**

The psalms have always been part of Christian worship — both public, formal, liturgical worship, and private prayer and devotion. But, because the psalms come to us from a different time and culture, we need help in unlocking the treasures of the psalter. The purpose of this article is to provide at least some of this needed help, in introductory fashion.

I begin by focusing on the psalms as ancient Hebrew poetry. Describing the psalms as ancient Hebrew poetry may seem obvious, but there are three elements here that merit discussion:

**Ancient:** One of the difficulties that modern Christians experience when using the psalms as prayer is the strangeness of many of the psalms. In part, this strangeness is the result of the distance in time that separates us from them. Most of the poems that make up the Book of Psalms come from the period of the monarchy and temple in Israelite history, from ca. 1000 to 600 B.C., with several earlier pieces (e.g., Psalm 29) that predate the monarchy, and some later contributions (e.g., Psalm 137) from the exilic and early post-exilic periods (ca. 600-500 B.C.). (The tradition of hymnody was continued in Israel in the thanksgiving hymns of the Qumran community, and of course in the Christian hymns.) And so, in studying any part of the Old Testament, including the psalms, we encounter the kinds of difficulties that any study of the past involves. For instance, we know very little of how the psalms were used in ancient Israel. On the basis of our meager evidence we can probably say that the majority of the psalms come from the cult of Israel’s temple; but given our limited knowledge of the temple cult, and the obscure and sometimes unintelligible “rubrics” that generally head the psalms, we can say very little with certainty about how the psalms functioned in Israel’s prayer.

**Hebrew:** A related difficulty is that the psalms come to us not only from the past, but also from a culture and society very different from our own. Of course, the most obvious indication of this is that the psalms are written in ancient Hebrew. But the problem is greater than that presented simply by a different language. In other words, if we are to understand the psalms, we need not only to translate this ancient Hebrew poetry into modern English; we need to “translate,” that is, to carry over not only words and sentences from one language to another, but also a whole culture that provides a setting to illumine the obscurities of the psalms.

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Let me illustrate what I mean with an example. Surely one of the best loved psalms, and the most familiar, is Psalm 23, the hymn to the divine Shepherd. The final words of the psalm (v. 6) are as follows: “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” I would imagine that many modern readers of the psalm would understand those words to speak of our final, eternal communion with God in the kingdom of heaven, interpreting the psalm’s words in the light of the promise of Jesus that “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places” (John 14:2). But this is what the psalm meant in its own cultural and religious context, a context in which an afterlife of eternal happiness with God only became part of Israel’s faith at a fairly late point in its history? Other questions that we must ask and answer if we are to understand this verse include these: Who is the speaker, the “I” of the psalm — any Israelite, or perhaps the king? What is meant by the “House of the Lord” — is it the temple in Jerusalem, or is it perhaps the holy land of promise, where Israel dwells? And is the traditional translation given above correct? Should we translate it as a statement, or as a prayer (“May I dwell in the house of Yahweh forever”)? Finally, what does “forever” (literally “for length of days”) mean? If “eternity” is unlikely, could it be merely a poetic expression for a long time? The answers to these questions need, if the psalm is to be understood, are provided in part by a knowledge of the ancient Near Eastern cultural world of the psalms.

**Poetry:** Robert Frost is reputed to have said: “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” The reader knows immediately what he means; many of the effects of poetry, the way poetry achieves its goal of artful communication on an emotional as well as on an intellectual plane — these are difficult, if not impossible, to recreate or reproduce in a translation. Happily, with Hebrew poetry, one of its chief effects is capturable in translation: the repetition on the level of concept, or statement, that has sometimes been accurately described as “thought-rime.” The technical term commonly used for this important facet of Hebrew poetry is “parallelism.” A few examples will make clear what I am speaking about (these can be multiplied indefinitely by even a brief look at the Psalter):

1. Psalm 35:4 Let those be put to shame and disgraced (A) who seek my life (B) Let those be turned back and confounded (A) who plot evil against me (B)

It is immediately obvious that the second sentence of Ps 35:4 echoes the first, varying the words but repeating the thought, with A corresponding to A, and B to B — hence, *sympoimuous parallelism,* as it is called by scholars of Hebrew poetry.
2. Psalm 34:11 The arrogant (A) grow poor and hungry (B) but those who seek the Lord (A) want for no good thing (B)

In this example the parallelism echoes the thought by contrast rather than by synonymy. The poet places “the arrogant” (literally “the lions,” a common metaphor for the pride and self-sufficiency of the powerful and wealthy) in contrast to those who seek the Lord (the poor, the devout) and contrasts their surprising and unexpected fates—the great and powerful in need, the poor and pious with abundance (a common reversal theme found in the New Testament as well as in the Old—for instance, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31).

As the reader will suspect, these two basic types of parallelism, the building blocks of Hebrew poetry, can be varied and recast by a skilled poet, to avoid the monotony that would be the result of a slavish and unimaginative use of these two fundamental forms. The greater the skill of the poet, the more subtle and varied will be the parallelistic verse. Several more examples can be provided.

3. Psalm 22:3 O my God, I cry out (A) by day (B) and you answer not (C) by night (B) and there is no relief for me (C)

Here the poet echoes only the second part of the verse (B and C), not the first.

4. Psalm 22:22 Save me (A) from the lion’s mouth (B) from the horns of the wild bulls (B) answer me (A)

While the parallelism is synonymous, or echoing type, the order of the corresponding parts is reversed (AB = BA), a technique called “chiasmus.”

We need not multiply examples of the variations on the basis types any further; our purpose here has just been to introduce the reader to the basic character of Hebrew poetry, and the resources mentioned at the end of this article can guide the interested reader to further study and understanding of the techniques of these ancient poets.

“Poetry is what gets lost in translation.”

Finally, we note in passing that the psalms are not the only examples of poetry in the Old Testament; much of the prophetic and wisdom literature is also cast in poetic form, and we have already mentioned the occasional poems found in the prose histories (Exodus 15, Judges 5). To recap: in describing the psalms as “ancient Hebrew poetry,” we have described three problems or difficulties that confront the reader of the psalms as he or she seeks in them a way of prayer: these prayers are from the distant past, from a different culture, and they communicate with the reader not as reporting prose, but as poetry, with the special emotion and intensity that is of the very nature of poetry. Because of these obstacles, the psalms need interpretation if they are to share their full riches with the Christian who seeks in them a way to pray biblically, and a form of prayer that gave life and meaning to generations of Jews, including Jesus of Nazareth. Can we find any better form of prayer than that which nourished God’s people, Israel, and that which formed the dying words of God’s son (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)?