

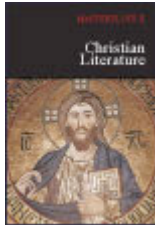
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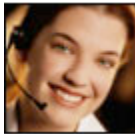
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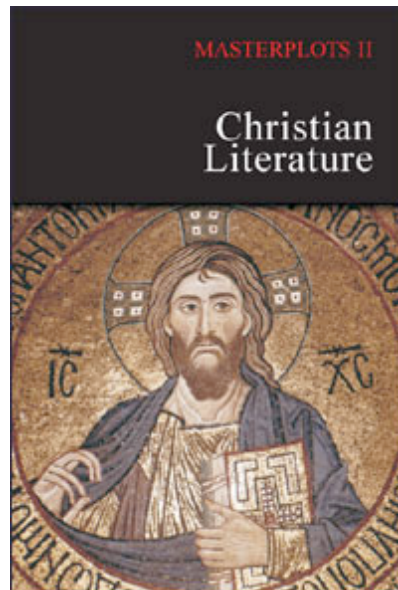
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Masterplots II: Christian Literature Psalms

Authors: Traditionally ascribed to David (c. 1030-c. 962 B.C.E.) and others

First transcribed: *Tehillim* (Hebrew), *Psalmoi* (Greek), dates unknown (English translation, 1384)

Edition Used: *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1990

Genres: Holy writings; poetry

Subgenres: Devotions; lyric poetry; theology

Core issues: The Bible; devotional life; faith; prayer; trust in God

Psalms is an Old Testament book of one hundred fifty religious songs, written by a variety of Hebrew authors over the span of several hundred years. The Psalms include several types of songs that vary considerably in style, content, and form. They are cited often in the New Testament, where many of them are associated with the life of Jesus the Messiah. The importance of the Psalms is illustrated further by their continued use throughout history both in public liturgy and in private devotions. The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of the best loved and most quoted texts in the entire Bible.

Overview

The English title Psalms derives from the Greek word *Psalmoi*, the book's title in the Septuagint version, which dates from the second century B.C.E. In its original Hebrew language, the title of Psalms is *Tehillim*, meaning "praises." The Psalms, however, are not uniformly praises, they also include other genres such as lament, wisdom, and historical recital songs.

In the Hebrew Bible, Psalms is the first book in the Writings, the third part of the Hebrew canon, and in the English Bible, Psalms is the first of the poetical books. The 150 Psalms are organized into five divisions (called "books"), each ending in a doxology: book 1, Psalms 1-41; book 2, Psalms 42-72; book 3, Psalms 73-89; book 4, Psalms 90-106; and book 5, Psalms 107-150. It has been suggested that the five books may represent stages in the collection process; they may be thematic groupings that move from lament to praise; or they may be an attempt to parallel the

five books of Moses (Genesis to Deuteronomy).

David is credited with the authorship of seventy-three Psalms. The remaining seventy-seven are attributed to a variety of authors, including Moses (Psalm 90), Solomon (Psalms 72 and 127), Heman (Psalm 88), and Ethan (Psalm 89). A number of Psalms are attributed to musical guilds known as the Sons of Korah and the Sons of Asaph, while still other Psalms are of anonymous origin.

Of the 150 Psalms, 116 have headings (often called "superscriptions") containing one or more of the following: the author's name, the traditional setting of the Psalm, typological designation, musical accompaniment, and other musical instructions. For example, the heading of the Third Psalm reads, "A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son." Although the scholarly consensus maintains that these headings are not a part of the original composition, the presence of the headings in both the Septuagint and in the Qumran scrolls suggests that they are at least very ancient. Furthermore, the fact that headings are found on the imbedded Psalms that begin at 2 Samuel 23:1 and Habakkuk 3:1 may show that the practice of attaching a heading was a normal part of composition.

The Psalms are lyric poetry and exhibit the universal features of poetry. Although poetry may take many forms, it can be distinguished from prose by its concentration on figurative language and word play, its combination of word sounds, its utilization of meter, and its terseness within a verse structure. The poetry of Psalms takes full advantage of metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and other figures of speech. The most famous metaphor in the Bible is "The Lord is my shepherd" (Ps. 23:1).

The verse structure of Hebrew poetry is based on parallelism of lines. A verse may consist of one, two, or three lines, but most often it will be two lines, with the second line related in some fashion to the first line. The second line may restate the thought of the first line (synonymous parallelism); it may state the antithesis of the first line (antithetical parallelism); or it may complete the thought of the first line (synthetic parallelism). Note the following examples: Psalm 19:1-2 "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (synonymous); Psalm 1:6 "The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish" (antithetical); and Psalm 119:9 "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to thy word" (synthetic).

Although parallelism of lines is the most distinctive mark of Hebrew poetry, another technique used in the Psalter is the acrostic poem (Pss. 25, 34, 111, 112, 119, and 145), in which each verse begins with successive letters of the alphabet. Psalm 119 is unique in that it consists of twenty-two sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and every verse within a section begins with the same letter.

As with all poetry, a significant attraction of Psalms is its ability to draw the reader into the poetic world through visual imagery, imaginative symbols, and appeals to the readers' emotions. This affective dimension of the Psalms speaks to the heart and to the passions with a fervent freshness and honesty that does not neglect the exasperating complexities of human existence. The Psalms give witness to both the greatest joys of life and to its greatest agonies. The emotions of the psalmist range from despair ("My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me." Ps. 55:4) to elation ("Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name." Ps. 103:1) and every feeling between those extremes.

By employing a variety of psalm types, the Hebrew psalmists were able to frame appropriate responses to the diversities of the life of faith. In his groundbreaking work Hermann Gunkel identified five basic genres of psalms: the individual lament, the communal lament, the communal hymn, the individual thanksgiving psalm, and the royal psalm. These genres do not exhibit strict, ironclad structures, nor do they explain the nature of every song in the entire collection, but they are helpful guides to the basic forms of biblical psalmic expression.

The most common genre in the book of Psalms is the lament, which is the worshiper's cry to God for deliverance from distress. The sufferer's trouble may take

the form of sickness (Psalm 6), personal or corporate sin (Psalm 51), oppression (Psalm 10), or an accusation (Psalm 17). The lament usually begins with an address to God ("Save me, O God" Ps. 54:1), followed by the specific complaint ("strangers have risen up against me" Ps. 54:3). The worshiper may then confess his/her trust in God ("God is my helper" Ps. 54:4) and offer up a petition to God ("heal me" Ps. 6:2). The lament may include a declaration of assurance that God has heard the prayer ("he has delivered me" Ps. 54:7) and conclude with a promise to praise God with a thanksgiving offering ("I will freely sacrifice unto you" Ps. 54:6).

Another genre, the thanksgiving psalm, is based on the final element of the lament. After the petitioner's prayer has been answered, the petitioner will offer the promised sacrifice and celebrate publicly with a psalm of thanksgiving as a testimonial to all who are present. This type of psalm normally includes three basic parts: the reason for praising God ("I will extol you, O God, for you have lifted me up" Ps. 30:1), the narration of the specific deliverance being celebrated ("I cried unto you and you healed me," Ps. 30:2-5), and a renewed vow to praise God ("I will give thanks to you forever" Ps. 30:12).

Unlike the thanksgiving psalm, which is based on a specific event in the life of the worshiper, the hymn is a psalm of descriptive praise that is uttered in praise of God's more comprehensive virtues ("Praise him for his mighty acts" Ps. 150:2). The hymns hold in tension the dialectic between God's transcendence and his immanence by emphasizing his power in creation and his care in providence, his majesty in kingship and his nearness in the salvation of the Exodus (Psalms 113, 135).

Other types of psalms are less prominent, such as the royal psalms (Psalm 72), the historical psalms (Psalm 78), the songs of Zion (Psalm 122), and the wisdom psalms. Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm, and includes several of the key themes that may be found in the genre. These characteristic themes are the family, God's law, justice, life's choices, life's inconsistencies, and the trust or fear of God.

Christian Themes

Although the book of Psalms is Hebrew literature from the Old Testament and is sometimes called the songbook of Israel's second temple, Christians have consistently witnessed to the power of the Psalms to give voice to their prayers and their expressions of worship. The Psalms have this power because, unlike other parts of Scripture, they are not God's words directed toward Israel; they are instead Israel's words directed to God in worshipful and prayerful response to his presence and actions among them. As long as Christians continue to acknowledge God's presence and activity in the Church, the Psalms will serve as a meaningful expression of the Christian response to God in worship and prayer.

Psalms suggests to the Christian that worship is deep, intense, and passionate, and that prayer is honest and fervent. In fact, the Psalms' honesty and fervency may offend modern Christian sensibilities at times, especially on those occasions when the psalmist prayed for the violent destruction of enemies and their children (for example, Ps. 3:7). These imprecatory psalms are difficult to reconcile with Christ's command to love our enemies. It should be remembered, however, that these psalms are cries for help, emerging from situations of deep suffering and oppression, and that the New Testament allows for God's intervention as vindicator of his people (Rom. 12:19; 1 Thess. 1:8; 2 Tim. 4:14; Heb. 10:30-31; Jude 14-15; Rev. 6:10).

Claus Westermann and Walter Brueggemann have shown that the diversity of psalmic types testifies to a dynamic life of faith. The lament and the hymn are opposite poles of Christian experience, but most of human existence falls somewhere between these extremes. Brueggemann argues that the lament speaks to the times of pain, the hymn rejoices in times of great joy, and the other types of psalms relate to periods of settled, average existence. Furthermore, the life of faith is not static; rather, people are often in movement from one stage to another. The Psalms address this dynamic element of Christian life.

In addition to the experiential themes that emerge from the Psalms, numerous theological topics stand out as well. The psalmists' cries for help assume that God is

savior and deliverer, an assumption that is given specific witness in the thanksgiving psalms, and is expanded in the hymns by mention of the Exodus. God's saving work includes his providential care, his forgiveness of sin, his healing of sickness, and his giving of his Spirit (Ps. 51:10-11). Additionally, God is portrayed prominently as creator and sovereign of the universe. As king, God is enthroned in heaven, active on earth, and coming to reign over the world (Psalm 96).

Sources for Further Study

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Lee Roy Martin

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