

The Poetry of Life

An Introduction to the Psalms

1. What We Don't Know

- a. *Selah*-Some kind of musical term, most likely, but modern scholars truly don't know the meaning of this word found in the margin of many psalms.
- b. The tune/melody to the psalms. Scripture is filled with references to people singing hymns/psalms, but today we have no idea how they were sung by worshippers.
- c. The authors. While many psalms have been designated "of David" or another author, many are still anonymous. The term "of/by David" in Hebrew might even mean "To David" or "For (as in dedicated to) David."

2. What We Do Know

- a. The Hebrew word for the book means "Praises," the Greek name means "Songs"
 - i. Both speak to the nature of the Psalms, often called "Songs of Praise"
- b. The 150 Psalms are divided into a series of 5 'books,' each concluding with its own doxology
 - i. 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150
 - ii. The book of Psalms was in their current arrangement by 250 BC, and probably a lot earlier.
- c. Many have noticed that the Psalms can be placed into several 'genres.' The four most common are:
 - i. Psalms of Lament: Often gut-wrenching, these psalms cry out to God in anguish. They often include words of trust in God and praise at the end. (ex. 3-7, 22, 30, 44, 60, 69, 71, 85, 102, 103, 130, 137)
 - ii. Psalms of Praise: Filled with praise about God, often referring to God's mighty acts and loving character. (ex. 8, 33, 47, 65, 97-100, 145-150)
 - iii. Psalms of Thanksgiving: Give thanks to God for his mighty deeds in the history of God's people or the individual author. (ex. 18, 30-32, 40, 66, 118)
 - iv. Psalms of Trust: Demonstrate trust in God's mercy and protection, often through difficult circumstances. (ex. 4, 16, 23, 73, 90, 123-126)

3. The Poetry of the Psalms

- a. The poetry of the Psalms is not based on rhyme, though word play is a somewhat common feature of Hebrew poetry
- b. The most common poetic device in the Psalms is *parallelism*
 - i. *Synonymous Parallelism* is the repeating of the same thought of the first line in the second line, only slightly different
 1. Psalm 19 opens "The heavens declare the glory of God, *and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*"
 - ii. *Antithetical Parallelism* is the second line giving a contrasting thought of the first line
 1. "The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, *but the way of the wicked will perish.*"
- c. Though not noticeable in English translations, the verses of the Psalms in Hebrew often have patterns for the syllables and words. This created a pleasant cadence or rhythm to the hearers of the Psalms. This is similar to the iambic pentameter of ancient Greek (The Odyssey) and English poetry that you may have learned about at some point.