

Hebrew Poetry –

The Book Of Psalms

The Psalms give us an insight into Hebrew poetry. In spite of the difficulties of translating poems into another language (getting the rhythms and ‘music’ of the words to flow) we do not need to be experts to appreciate the beauty of these ancient writings. In the Hebrew Bible the Book of Psalms is divided into five parts. Each is an anthology (collection) of works by different authors. As a whole they represent the hymn book of the Temple. This is clear from the musical directions printed with them, and the references in their titles to directors of the Temple worship such as the sons of Korah and Asaph.

Approximately half of the psalms have headings indicating they were written by King David, who had great musical talent (see 1 Samuel 16:16 and Amos 6:5). One is attributed to Moses (Psalm 90), while others are anonymous. Many of them have been set to music for English congregations.

It helps our appreciation of the psalms to realise traditional Hebrew and English poetry operate upon different rules. Both genres have a regular metre or pattern of beats per line. And both rejoice in elaborate similes or metaphors to link the emotions of the writer with the experiences of the reader. But whereas our senses delight in the endings of the lines having the same sound (rhyming), the Israelites enjoyed a mathematical structure. For example succeeding lines may begin with consecutive letters of the alphabet (acrostics), or two contrasting statements may be set out in the form A B, B A. A prominent feature of Hebrew poems is parallelism, that is one line makes a statement, and the next says the same thing again in a different way,

perhaps with stronger emphasis. Here is an example from Psalm 2:

*“The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD
and against His anointed,
saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.’
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
Then He will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury”.*

It is not possible here to cover the huge range of psalms. But it is worth spending a few minutes with the psalms of David. David had many frightening experiences, as we have seen, where his life hung by a thread. He also made a mess of his life as a result of his affair with Bathsheba. His fears, his thankfulness when God rescued him, his remorse after his sin, and his confidence in the mercy of his Lord, all come out in the poems he composed. Interestingly, many of his psalms have a note indicating the circumstances under which he wrote. See, for example, the titles of Psalms 34, 51 and 57. Psalm 23, the Song of the Shepherd, has brought comfort to millions. Here with powerful imagery David imagines himself as a lamb, and God as his shepherd, leading him through life with all its dangers, and even the valley of the shadow of death. Psalm 119 is a brilliant example of the acrostic form, with each stanza of eight verses having the same Hebrew letter at the start of each line, and moving on through the whole alphabet. At the same time, the theme rotates through eight synonyms for God’s word.

But David was not just a poet. He was also a prophet. The Spirit of God inspired him. When he wrote from his own

experiences, he was also predicting the work of Jesus himself. To demonstrate this point, we have these words of the Apostle Peter in the New Testament about Psalm 16:8-11:

“This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him, ‘... my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades (the grave), or let your Holy One see corruption.’ Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.

Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ ...”
Acts 2:23-31

There are some truly amazing prophecies about Jesus in what are known as the ‘Messianic’ psalms (‘Messiah’ is a title in the prophets for the king promised to Israel). We can trace the circumstances of his birth (116:16), his rejection by his own family (69:8), his betrayal (41:9), the false witnesses at his trial (35:11), his crucifixion (22:16-18), his resurrection (16:10) and his ascension to heaven (110:1). These words, written 1000 years before Jesus was born, show that the Bible is truly the work of God.

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