

The Book of Psalms – Praying through the Psalms

“And, among all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given. Elsewhere in the Bible you read only that the Law commands this or that to be done, you listen to the Prophets to learn about the Saviour's coming, or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about yourself.”

– Letter to Marcellinus by St. Athanasius, 4th Century¹

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“The Psalms are prayers for different moments in the spiritual life, and the whole collection of them is a kind of atlas, a set of maps charting its vicissitudes and the various paths whereby we may negotiate them.”² As you begin reading through the psalms, you will notice the many images of different paths, even beginning with the first psalm.

Psalm 1 is unlike the rest – rather than a prayer, it is more a programmatic statement on what constitutes the good life.³ There is no ambiguity in stating the two different paths through life. Psalm 1 may serve as “a point of orientation in the messy and unclear situations that are evoked by some of the psalms that follow.”⁴ But make no mistake – this is not a “how-to” statement for “happiness” – though conventional translation of the Hebrew word *ashrei* makes it seem so; rather, the Hebrew word *ashrei* denotes a

¹ <https://www.athanasius.com/psalms/aletterm.htm>

² Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 317.

³ Davis, 317.

⁴ Davis, 317.

condition of a dignified and honorable character of a certain way of life as judged from an external perspective.⁵

The good life envisioned in the first psalm is also not necessarily one of high social standing; the fact that the psalm is immediately followed by a series of laments (Pss 2–7) indicates that those who are “happy” may be those suffering mockery and insults due to their ways, even mocked and insulted by their own community.⁶

May you find yourself embracing the full ranges of emotions expressed in the psalms. Though the Hebrew title of the Book of Psalms can be translated as “Praisings,” the first half of this book is dominated by cries of pain and appeals for deliverance.⁷ It is through these emotional honesty of the psalms that, as John Calvin observed, we are protected and are remedied for “that most baneful infection, hypocrisy” – the psalms free us to be honest with God.⁸ Furthermore, not only are we given the language of how to be honest with God, we are also freed from the tyranny of our own emotions by giving space to voice them externally.⁹

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Biblical Hebrew poetry is difficult to translate adequately, yet we see even in our translations we get some sense of the aesthetics of the psalms. Biblical poetry does not rhyme; however, the writers created coherent structures through other kinds of repetition-with-variation: in sound patterns (in the original Hebrew there is alliteration and assonance, stressed and unstressed syllables), in echoing words and themes (this can be picked up in translations).¹⁰

⁵ Davis, 317.

⁶ Davis, 317.

⁷ Davis, 325.

⁸ Davis, 325.

⁹ Davis, 325.

¹⁰ Davis, 314.

As you read through the psalms, notice the intensification of themes through repetitions. Different images are clarified through examples of “repetition-with-escalation”¹¹

Also, in your mind’s eye, remember that most regions in the land of Israel were not thickly forested, even in ancient times, but semiarid. Thus, images of bountiful fruit trees were valuable. The availability of water is the difference between life and death. These valuable assets are sources of life.

Furthermore, as you continue to pray through the psalms, look for different formatting of the psalms and translations. They heighten the poetic nature of the psalms. For centuries, the Church of England (thus the Anglican and Episcopalian in the US and Methodist churches) have relied on *The Book of Common Prayer* which offers the whole of Psalms set out in lines of poetry with guides for direct recitation, antiphonal recitation, responsorial recitation, and responsive recitation.¹² The psalms are to be said and heard out loud – a practice that is over 2000 years old for the Christian church and much older for our cousins of Jewish faith.¹³

For those interested in a poetic translation of the psalms, *The Book of Psalms: Poetry in Poetry* by Rabbi Dr. Jeffery M. Cohen offers a beautiful interpretation. His translations are based on the original Hebrew. The book can be previewed on Google Books¹⁴ and purchased at major bookstores.

May you be blessed through your praying of the psalms.

¹¹ Davis, 318.

¹² https://episcopalchurch.org/files/book_of_common_prayer.pdf, PDF pg 582

¹³ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/parallel/paral18.cfm>

¹⁴ https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/XbhoDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0