

# Bible Study in Psalms

## Structure

Hebrew poetry, such as the Psalms, is different from poetry we are more familiar with. We tend to think of poetry as rhyme of the sounds of words and the rhythm of the words. Hebrew poetry does sometime exhibit rhythm (in Hebrew, but usually not in English), but instead of similarity of sounds (rhyming) the primary structural element is similarity of ideas, almost a “rhyming of thoughts.” Hebrew poetry “consists in a balance of *thought*, i.e., in *logical* rhythm. The poet follows one assertion by another line of thought parallel to the first. A verse then consists of at least two parts in which the second part is parallel to the first. Parallelism is one of the main features of Hebrew poetry.” (Mickelsen, p. 324)

The parallel or contrasting ideas in Hebrew poetry can be expressed in any language. Unlike poetry based on specific words or sounds, Hebrew poetry survives translation very well. Recognizing these parallels can help us understand the content of the writer, as well as to begin to appreciate the literary beauty of the writing. “The awareness of the use of parallelisms will also be of great help in assuring correct exposition.” (Traina, p. 70)

Mickelsen provides several examples of different types of parallelism in Biblical texts (p. 325-326):

**Synonymous parallel** (the second line expresses an identical or similar thought):

Who forgives all your iniquity  
Who heals all your diseases (Psalm 103:3)


**Antithetic parallel** (the second line expresses a sharp contrast)

A gentle answer turns away rage  
But a word that hurts stirs up anger (Proverbs. 15:1)

**Emblematic parallel** (one line is figurative, the other is literal)

As a hart longs for flowing streams  
So my soul longs for thee O God (Psalm 42:1)

An extended type of parallel ideas often appears in a “chiastic” structure (from the word “chi”, the Greek equivalent of the letter “X”). Chiastic structure still uses parallel ideas, but reverses the order:

But his delight is in the law of the LORD  
  
And in His law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:2)

(Hence the idea of “chiastic” or “X” structure.)

## Language

The other major characteristic of any poetry is the use of emotional and figurative language. “When one remembers that the poet employs flexible language, and that he expresses feelings rather than rigid logical concepts, one will not attempt to expound his language as if he utilized a literal, scientific vocabulary, or examine his statements at every turn for a precise, systematic theology. (Traina, p. 70)

The language and figures of speech often indicate the “atmosphere” of the passage, the “underlying tone or spirit of a passage, which, though intangible, is nevertheless real. Some of the moods by which a portion may be characterized are those of despair, thanksgiving, awe, urgency, joy, humility, or tenderness.” (Traina, p. 71).

Poetry, by definition, expresses the emotional content of the writer, probably more than any other type of Biblical literature. Therefore, when studying a passage in Psalms or other poetic portion of Scripture,

recognizing the atmosphere or tone if the passage is critical to understanding the passage. “Until one has discovered the mood of a portion of Scripture, one has not come into vital contact with its author’s mind and spirit.” (Traina, p.71)

Mickelsen (p. 332-333) offers some guidelines for studying Psalms:

1. Seek out the historical occasion for the Psalm. Bible cross references are often helpful here.
2. Note the attitude and emotional tone. Calvin called Psalms “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.”
3. Observe the poet’s basic convictions about the character of God.
4. Note the symbolic elements, especially in Messianic Psalms.

### ***A Note on Imprecatory Psalms***

Imprecatory psalms (those that pray for evil to befall an enemy) often present problems for us.

Mickelsen’s suggestion about imprecatory Psalms (such as 109 or 137) is worth quoting at length:

In dealing with the imprecatory elements in the Psalms, the interpreter should regard them as the poetic expressions of individuals who were incensed at the tyranny of evil, yet whose attitude towards retribution is so colored by their sense of being wronged or of the blasphemy committed that they speak out in language far removed from the teaching that one should leave judgment to God, or from Jesus’ statements on the treatment of enemies. ... The intensity of the poet’s feelings are certainly the product of his experiences. (Mickelsen, p. 333)

C. S. Lewis also offers some help on the imprecatory Psalms:

For we can still see, in the worst of their maledictions, how these old poets were, in a sense, near to God. Though hideously distorted by the human instrument, something of the Divine voice can be heard in those passages. Not, we trust, that God looks upon their enemies as they do: He “desireth not the death of a sinner”. But doubtless He has for the sin of those enemies just the implacable hostility which the poets express. ... The ferocious parts of the Psalms serve as a reminder that there is in the world such a thing as wickedness and that it is hateful to God. (*Reflections on the Psalms*, p. 32-33)