



## UNIT 6 LESSON – 9

### THE POETRY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Much of the Old Testament is written in the form of poetry. The major poetic book is Psalms, but other poetic books are Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, and Lamentations. In addition there are large poetic sections in many of the prophets and a translation such as the New Revised Standard Version or New International Version distinguishes poetry from prose. Isolated poems also occur in various places, e.g.,

Isaac's blessings of Jacob (Gen.27:27-29) and curse of Esau (Gen. 27:39-40)

Jacob's Blessing (Gen. 49:2-27)

The Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1-43)

Moses' Blessing (Deut. 33:2-29)

The Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10)

David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan (11 Sam. 1:19-27).

#### 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF HEBREW POETRY

Hebrew poetry has distinctive features, the most important of which is parallelism. In practice a couplet normally consists of one thought expressed twice: i.e., parallel expressions of the same thought, or "a rhyme of thought".

1. **Synonymous**            The second half of the couplet echoes the first (Psalm 78:1)
2. **Antithetic**            The second half of the couplet completes the thought by contrast (Proverbs 15:13).
3. **Synthetic**            The second half supplements the first (Eccles.7:2)
4. **Emblematic**            A comparison completes the second half. (Job 5:26)
5. **Climactic**            Repetition is used to build up a climax (Psalm 29:4)
6. **Introverted**            2 lines are arranged on ABBA pattern (Proverbs 23:15-16)

Variations in these forms occur

Metre was used in Hebrew poetry, but rhyme was not generally employed. Poems were not divided into stanzas, though sometimes there is a refrain (or chorus) (Psalm 107).

Occasionally poetry was arranged in the form of an acrostic working through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Psalm, 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145; Proverbs 31:18-31).



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#### II CLASSIFICATION OF THE PSALMS

The Psalms are a collection of 150 songs of Israel. Modern scholars believe that their origin was in the worship of Israel and that any classification should be based on their setting in life, i.e. the occasion of its original composition or use. Using this basis Gunkel distinguished 5 major types.

1. **Hymn**  
Originally a solo or choral item in worship, but later an expression of the author's devotion. (Psalms 8, 19, 24, 33, 65, 68, 96, 100, 104, 105, 111, 113, 114, 115, 117, 135, 136, 145, 147, 148, 149, 150.).
2. **Communal Laments**  
Used in services of public penitence in the face of a calamity which threatened communal life (Psalms 44, 74, 79, 80, 83).
3. **Royal Psalms**  
Connected with the Israelite Monarch (Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132).
4. **Individual Laments**  
The worshipper, in distress, bewails his persecution and often moves on to assurance or thanksgiving (Psalms 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 38, 42, 43, 51, 54, 55, 556, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, 143).
5. **Individual Songs of Thanksgiving**  
Possibly they were connected originally with an offering of thanksgiving and in time the song of thanksgiving became more important than the ritual act of sacrifice. (Psalms 30, 32, 34, 41, 66, 92, 98, 138).

Apart from these major types, Gunkel distinguished several minor types:

1. **Songs of Pilgrimage**  
Sung on journeys to festivals (Psalms 84, 122).
2. **Communal Songs of Thanksgiving**  
For special occasions of thanksgiving (Psalms 67, 124).
3. **Wisdom Poetry**  
(Psalms 2, 15, 20, 24, 60, 110, 132).

There is some overlap in these categories and several psalms are of mixed type (Psalms 9, 10, 40, 78, 89, 90, 94, 99, 107, 108, 123, 129, 137, 144).



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#### 111. THE SUPERSCRPTIONS

Apart from 34 "Orphan" psalms, there are titles at the head of each psalm giving its origin or authorship, or sometimes musical directions. The meaning of many of these titles is obscure. The superscriptions are generally regarded as being later than the psalms themselves, but they are pre-Christian in origin and therefore reflect ancient Jewish traditions about them.

The term "Selah" occurs more than 70 times in the Psalms. It appears to be a musical direction and many explanations of its meaning have been suggested. They include:

1. It was a signal for a shout of assent from the congregation.
2. It marked a musical interlude in the singing.
3. It was the signal for the congregation to bow.

#### IV THE TEACHING OF THE PSALMS

The book of Psalms is not a theological treatise: it is a record of Israel at worship. The Psalms are the work of many authors over a long period, but we can still find in them the essential truths of Israelite religion.

1. **God**  
The Psalms assume the existence of God (14:1) and one God only. His dwelling place is the heavenly throne (33:13; 53:2; 103:19; 123:1), but God is really omnipresent (139:7-12). God's attributes include righteousness, justice, mercy, and faithfulness (89:14; 97:2). Life's highest joy is to be in communion with God (16:11).
2. **Men**  
God's creation reached its highest point in man (Ps.8). Yet it is man's lot to perish like beasts or plants (39:4-6; 49:12; 89:47-48; 90:3-10; 103:14-15; 144:4). After death, Sheol (the place of the departed) awaits man (6:5; 30:9; 88:3-12; 115:17). Occasionally there is a hint of survival beyond death (49:15; 73:23-26). Man is viewed as in need of God (15:1-5; 24:3-6; 34:12-14) and failure to meet God's requirements is sin (32:5; 38:18; 41:4; 51:1-4; 79:9; 90:8).
3. **The World**  
God is creator of the world and remains active in nature (18:7-15; 29:1-11; 65:6-13; 104).



#### 4. **Sacrifice and Worship**

While there are occasionally insulting references to ritual (40:6; 51:16-17) the majority of Psalms accept without question the practice of sacrificial worship. There are many references to the temple and its precincts (5:7; 26:6; 84:2,10; etc.) and to the worshipping congregation (35:18; 40:9-10; 118:26-27; 132:8-9, etc.). Various types of offerings are mentioned (20:3; 50:8; 54:6; 56:12). The duty of paying vows is frequently mentioned (22:25; 56:12; 66:13, 76:11 etc.).

### V **THE VALUE OF THE PSALMS**

R.B.Y. Scott suggests 6 ways in which the Psalms are of value to Christians:

1. They provide Christians with language of prayer and praise
2. They are a central part of God's self-revelation
3. The Psalms are the Old Testament writing most readily adopted to the New Testament Gospel.
4. The Church, following Apostolic practice, has used Psalms in worship, finding a richer meaning in their words in the light of the New Covenant.
5. The Psalms are the best aid to private devotion.
6. The Psalms have been an inspiration for many hymns. Well-known Hymns which are paraphrases of Psalms include:

"The King of Love My Shepherd Is:"	-	Psalm 23
"A Mighty Fortress is our God"	-	Psalm 46
"O God, Our Help in Ages Past"	-	Psalm 90
"Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken"	-	Psalm 87

This tradition is continued by many modern Christian song-writers.

### VI **PROBLEMS IN USING PSALMS**

Because the Psalms are pre-Christian in origin and remote from our age, there are certain problems in their Christian use in present times:

#### 1. **The Language of Ritual**

Christians are not concerned in the temple ritual of so many Psalms. However, the devotion expressed can be shared apart from the literal meaning. Psalm 51:7 can be a prayer for inner cleansing; Psalm 66:13-15 can be a pledge of dedication to God's service.

#### 2. **Unchristian Attitudes**

Because the Psalms come before Christian revelation, certain attitudes are below the high standards of Christian ethics and belief. This is seen in the attitude to death (6:5) and sickness (38:3) and the vindictiveness of many psalms in contrary to Christian



teaching about love (41:10; 58:10; 137:9). The cry for revenge is a cry to God for vindication, which men felt must be accomplished in this life.

3. **Royal and Nationalistic Psalms**

In ancient Israel the nation and its religion were closely identified, and some Psalms appear to be more political than religious (20, 48, 60, 83). As Christians we must beware of identifying our nation's cause with God's – a mistake often made in past times.

The Psalms are the major poetry of the Old Testament and for this reason we have concentrated on them. However, remember that poetry is not confined to them or to the traditional poetic books.

**QUESTION 1**

How would you classify Psalm 3. Why?

**QUESTION 2**

Write out an example of each of the 6 types of parallelism. You may use the examples given on page 36 or find your own.

**QUESTION 3**

Why is Psalm 113 a Psalm of Praise?

**QUESTION 4**

How can the Psalms be relevant to Christians?

**QUESTION 5**

What problems could a Christian have with Psalm 109:6-10? How could you overcome it?

**QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:**

What Psalm (s) has/have been particularly relevant to you? Why?

Read Psalm 51:

Does any verse particularly encourage or challenge you?