

RESURRECTION OPC - ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL
Hermeneutics: How to Read the Bible

WEEK 8 | JUNE 26, 2016

Introduction & Acknowledgement

In our first session, we looked at an overall approach to reading Scripture *contextually, grammatically, theologically, and doxologically*. In our last session, we looked at the interpretation of prophecy and typology. Today, we study interpretation of poetry. In so doing, we continue to follow the lectures of Dr. Benjamin Shaw.

Poetry

*"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night."
(Psalm 1.1-2)*

Definition

- Modern usage define poetry as follows: "writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm." (*Merriam-Webster Online*)
- When we turn to biblical poetry, however, we mean something different:
 - "Poetry itself is not unique to the Bible, but the poetry of the Bible is unique in the sense that it differs from most poetry. Most poetry is essentially aesthetic, that is, it is concerned with beauty and expressing the beautiful. Biblical poetry, on the other hand is as much concerned with truth as it is with beauty. The figures and images of biblical poetry are as much concerned with proclaiming theological truth as they are concerned with the expression of what is beautiful." (*Shaw*)

Technique

- Unlike English poetry, Hebrew poetry seems to make little use of *meter* or *rhyme* to convey its effect.
- Rather, Hebrew poetry makes use of a device known as *parallelism*. The definitive study on parallelism was the 1754 Oxford University doctoral treatise of Robert Lowth (1710-1787), *Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*.

Parallelism

- In parallelism, lines of poetry are joined either in couplets (two) or triplets (three).
- Elements of subsequent lines match up with elements of previous lines.
- 'Movement' occurs through "development or intensification" (*Robert Alter - The Art of Biblical Poetry*)
- Lowth identified three fundamental types:
 - Synonymous: *subsequent lines make subtle distinctions...*
 - "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" (Ps 2.1)
 - "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein..." (Ps 24.1)
 - **Note**: Psalm 24.1 is also an example of what is called incomplete parallelism - where an element of the first line ("the LORD's") is not present in the second, but is implied.
 - Antithetical: *subsequent lines make contrasts...*
 - "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother." (Prov 10.1)
 - Synthetic: *subsequent lines build a cumulative picture of the image suggested by the first line...*
 - "The LORD is my shepherd..." (Psalm 23)

The Psalms

- While most of the OT deals with Israel *corporately*, the Psalms largely express the experience of *individuals*.
- These expressions are meant to be *representative*: "They may reflect the experiences of the individual author, but they are written so that the reader may see himself and his experience in them... the reader is invited to see here the troubles and triumphs of the believing soul. When the Christian seems to lack words for prayer or praise, he may find them laid out for him in the Psalms." (*Shaw*)
- "There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn... all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated." (John Calvin)

Interpreting the Psalms

- Make use of the historical headings. “The notes reproduced in small print in most of our versions, at the head of all but a few of the psalms, are part of the canonical text of the Hebrew Bible... The New Testament not only treats these headings as holy writ, but following our Lord’s example it is prepared to build its arguments on one or another of the notes of authorship which form part of them (Mk 12.35-37; Acts 2.29ff, 34ff; 13.35-37).” (*Derek Kidner – Commentary on Psalms 1-72*)
- Use your imagination. Imagine you are in the place of the psalmist...
- Meditate:
 - “Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God.” (*J.I. Packer – Knowing God*)
 - What is the leading image?
 - What is the key idea/thought behind this image?
 - Goal: “A psalm that makes the reader say to himself, “Yes, I have been there. I am not there now, but I have been there, and the psalmist is right.”” (*Shaw*)

Messianic Psalms

- A ‘Messianic’ psalm is one that speaks of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This can happen in different ways:
 - Some psalms speak *directly* – the psalmist sees Christ (Psalms 2, 22, 45, 72, 110).
 - Others speak *indirectly* – something about the psalmist’s person or experience typifies the person or experience of Christ (Psalms 16, 69, 89, 109)
 - Speak mysteriously – the connection is less obvious (Ps 34, 40)
 - For a larger list of Messianic psalms and their New Testament references, see the page on “Psalms” in our *The English Bible: A Concise Summary* – available at: resurrectionopc.org/resources/discipleship/
- Two additional considerations need to be remembered:
 - Typological kingship: “The distinctive role of David as God’s anointed... explains the centrality of his person in the Psalms... As it fares with the messianic king, so it fares with each member of the messianic kingdom.” (*O. Palmer Robertson – The Flow of the Psalms*)
 - Union with Christ: “It should be noted that since David was a type of Christ, there is a sense in which all of the Psalms of David at least allude to Christ. It is also the case that, as Christ suffered in the place of his people, all psalms of suffering point in some fashion to the suffering of Christ. As the interpreter meditates on the psalms, he should be careful to note that as the psalms give the reader a full picture of the troubles and triumphs of the faithful, that Christ has shared both those troubles and triumphs with his people. This consideration should serve to draw us closer to Christ, knowing that he is with us in all things.” (*Shaw*)

Imprecatory Psalms

- How should we interpret those psalms that pray for God’s judgment upon the psalmist’s enemies? How do we reconcile such prayers with the command of our Lord to love and pray for our enemies (Lk 6.27-28)?
- Here we would do well to heed the words of William Binnie, in his *A Pathway Into the Psalter*:
 - “It is their hearty desire and prayer that the violated majesty of the law may not remain unrevenged... If we had more of the Psalmist’s consuming zeal for the cause of God... the imprecations would sound less strange in our ears.”
 - “David is the Old Testament type of the inviolable majesty of Christ; and therefore his imprecations are prophetic of the final doom of all the hardened enemies of Christ and His Church: and in this sense the Christian appropriates them in prayer. Thus... they are a wholesome antidote to the religious sentimentality of our time, which shuts its eyes to the truth that God’s wrath against impenitent despisers of his grace is at once necessary and salutary.”
- In utilizing such psalms, we pray not for personal revenge (Prov 24.17, Rom 12.19-21), but that God would vindicate his justice by punishing his and our enemies – by conversion or removal, in person or by substitution (1Pet 3.18)

Resources

- William Binnie, *A Pathway Into the Psalter*
- John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*
- Derek Kidner, *Commentary on the Psalms* (2 vols)
- O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*