

PSALMING THE BLUES

At the Intersection of Pain and Praise



A SEVEN-WEEK STUDY WITH

Dr. Tony W. Cartledge

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Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,
www.nurturingfaith.net.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-938514-76-0

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The Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem on a rainy morning

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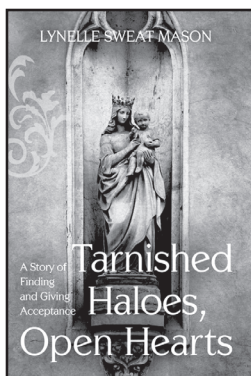
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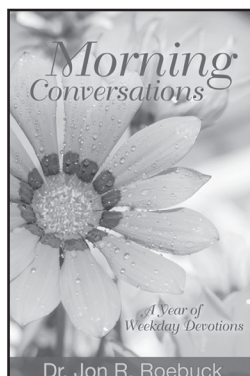
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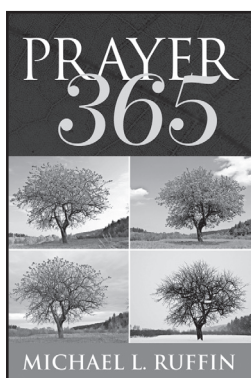
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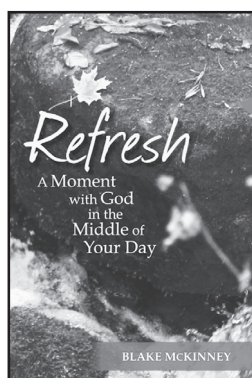
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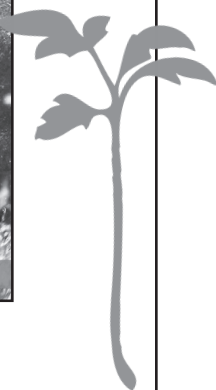
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ABBREVIATIONS

ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
NET	New English Translation (also known as the NETBible)
LXX	Septuagint, an early Greek translation of the Old Testament
MT	Masoretic Text, the “standard” Hebrew text of the Old Testament
NASB	New American Standard Bible, 1977 edition
NAS95	New American Standard Bible, 1995 edition
NIV	New International Version, 1984 edition
NIV11	New International Version, 2011 edition
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

PREFACE



Bible study is a discipline that calls for the engagement of both hearts and minds. The Nurturing Faith Bible Study Series is designed to focus attention on biblical texts that expand the mind and enrich the heart.

Dr. Tony Cartledge brings the insights of a scholar, the heart of a pastor, and the communication skills of a seasoned writer and editor to this important task. With careful scholarship he guides learners to a clearer understanding of the context—language, culture, and setting—in which the biblical accounts occurred.

Then the important question is considered, “How do these ancient words speak to us as people of faith today?” Truth—not bound by time and culture—awaits those who are willing to explore, contemplate, and apply these biblical treasures.

Bible study deserves the best of both hearts and minds. So as a distinguishing mark, the Nurturing Faith Bible Study Series does not attempt to “dumb down” the lessons or to ignore the challenges of serious inquiry.

Therefore, each lesson contains “The Hardest Question” in which Dr. Cartledge both raises and responds to such challenges in understanding and applying the biblical revelation to today’s living.

An honest wrangling with the biblical text—while guided by God’s Spirit—can produce clearer understanding and stronger commitments. Such Bible study will indeed nurture one’s faith.

The Bible is a compilation of sacred literature—diverse in style and genre. For example, these lessons from the Psalms explore the unique characteristics of Hebrew poetry.

Life is full of joy, yet not all of life is joyful. The question to be faced is not whether we will experience sadness and grief but where we will turn in such times. These insightful and inspiring lessons from selected psalms build trust and hope in the promises of God that have sustained generations.

Modern challenges often provide age-old feelings of loss, insecurity, and hopelessness. These honest, prayerful, poetic words of the psalmist, however, lead to places where life is sustained and the future can be faced with renewed faith. May your study of these psalms bring much insight and hope.

*John D. Pierce, Publisher
Nurturing Faith, Inc.*

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PSALMS, THEN AND NOW



INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

We can't begin to appreciate the psalms unless we recognize that they were written as poetry, with many of them intended for singing as well as reading or reciting. One can enjoy the psalms and profit from reading them without knowing a thing about Hebrew poetry, but learning a few characteristic nuances can enhance both our appreciation and knowledge of the psalms.

Hebrew poetry is both like and unlike its English counterpart. To begin, with the exception of English free verse, both Hebrew and English poets speak in related phrases designed to carry a thought forward in lyrical fashion, generally following a detectable rhythm, or meter.

When we speak of meter, we think of **rhythm**, a pattern of beats that repeat. For example, we're familiar with these lines:

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

These verses are written in a meter called "anapestic tetrameter," in which each line contains four units, each of which includes two weak beats and a strong one.

That meter was a favorite of another popular poet, as well:

The sun did not shine, it was too wet to play,
So we sat in the house all that cold cold wet day.¹

We notice a clear pattern of beats, in which both accented and unaccented syllables play a role. We also hear a system of rhyme, with similar sounds occurring in a predictable pattern. In this case, the pattern is two unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable.

In Hebrew poetry, the beat consists only of accented syllables, and the accented syllables are always on the important words. The neat interlude of the same number of unaccented syllables is not a primary characteristic, however. Sometimes a meter is generally recognizable (e.g. 3:3, 3:2), but the concept of "rhythm" in English and Hebrew poetry is somewhat different.

A second thing we generally associate with poetry is the concept of **rhyme**. Again, with the exception of free verse, we expect an arrangement in which patterns of lines end with the same sound.

Perhaps the shortest example of poetic rhyme is this one by e.e. cummings, titled “Fleas.”

Adam
had 'em

Or consider Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” which begins like this:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Here, Frost uses a rhyming pattern of a-b-a-a-b.

Or consider this example of a limerick, attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, which has an a-a-b-b-a pattern:

God’s plan made a hopeful beginning,
But Man spoilt his chances by sinning.
 We trust that the story
 Will end in great glory,
But at present the other side’s winning.

Rhyme is important to much English poetry, but is rare in Hebrew poetry. The latter rarely repeats sounds, but that does not mean it is not interested in repetition. In fact, Hebrew poetry is all about repetition, with its primary characteristic being a repetition of thoughts: its “rhyme” is one of sense rather than sound.

The basic unit of Hebrew verse is a couplet (also called a “bicola”) in which the second line is roughly **parallel** to the first. Since the groundbreaking study of Bishop Robert Lowth,² scholars have recognized several variations in the pattern, but all of them in some way involve parallelism.

In *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Robert Alter argues that the primary purpose of parallelism in all of its forms is for following lines to intensify the previous ones. Thus, he describes all types of parallelism as “structures of intensification.”³

The easiest type of parallelism to recognize and understand is generally called **synonymous parallelism**. In it, the second line repeats the sense of the first line, but in different words. For example, consider Ps. 2:1:

Why do the nations conspire,
And the peoples plot in vain?

The word translated as “peoples” can describe an ethnic or political unit, so the conspiracy of nations and the peoples’ plotting state the same thought.

Antithetic parallelism reinforces the first line from a contrary perspective—it gets the same idea across by stating something that sounds like the opposite. Here’s an example from Ps. 37:9:

For the wicked shall be cut off;
But those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land.

These lines make the same point from different perspectives: The removal of the wicked from the land takes place in tandem with the installation of the righteous in their place.

A third type of parallelism is one in which the second line advances or intensifies the thought of the first line in a way that is neither synonymous nor antithetical. This is often called **synthetic** or **formal parallelism**.

Consider Isaiah’s prayer (Isa. 64:1):

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
That the mountains would tremble before you!

These lines do not repeat the same thought, but the second line suggests the effect of the first: God’s ripping of the heavens would cause the mountains to tremble.

Couplets are most common in Hebrew poetry, but triplets or tricola also appear, as in Job 3:5, where Job utters a triple curse on the day of his birth, repeating the same general thought in three different ways:

Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
Let clouds settle upon it;
let the blackness of the day terrify it.

As in English, Hebrew poetry is particularly well suited for the expression of both pain and praise, for complaint and questions, for accusations and response. It served well the prophets who pronounced judgment and hope, for

the psalmists who offered praise and lament, for the wisdom teachers who spoke in both aphorisms and deep questions.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF PSALMS

The book of Psalms served as a repository of Israel's favorite hymns, both of praise and lament. We should be aware that it is not the only source of psalms, for they can also be found in narrative, prophetic, and wisdom books.

The Hebrew title of the book is *tehillim*, the plural form of a word meaning "song of praise" or "hymn."

The English name of the book comes from the Septuagint (LXX) title, *Psalmoi*, which is a translation of the Hebrew word *mizmor*, which appears 57 times as the title for a psalm. *Mizmor* means "song," generally of the type that may be accompanied by stringed instruments. The Greek word *psalterion* was also used in reference to psalms, which is why you sometimes hear the book referred to as "the Psalter."

As we have noted, the psalms—many of them, at least—were not just poems, but songs. Many of the psalms contain superscriptions that indicate the name of a tune, or some sort of instruction for the worship leader.

The psalms were also prayers, and so can be referred to by the Hebrew word *tephillot*, as at the end of Psalm 72, where it says "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended."

Arrangement

The book of Psalms contains 150 psalms divided into five sections:

- Book 1: 1-41
- Book 2: 42-72
- Book 3: 73-89
- Book 4: 90-10
- Book 5: 107-150

The division is mostly arbitrary except that the second section contains most of the "Elohistic Psalter," which stretches from 42-83 and is distinguished by the use of *Elohim* as the name for God. Some of these psalms appear twice in the psalter, employing *Elohim* in one place and *Yahweh* in another (Psalms 14 and 53 or Pss. 40:13-17 and 70). The division into five sections was probably done as an intentional parallel to the five books of the Torah.

We note that the numbering of the psalms is different in Protestant and Catholic Bibles, because Protestant Bibles are based on the Hebrew divisions, and

Catholic/Orthodox Bibles are based on divisions found in the Greek and Latin translations. To cite one example among several, Psalms 9 and 10 are separate in Hebrew, but one psalm in the Greek translation, abbreviated LXX. In addition, the LXX adds Psalm 151, which is not found in Protestant Bibles. The Syriac translation contains 155 psalms, some of which have also been found in texts at Qumran.

Authorship

Who wrote the psalms? Many people consider David, “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:21, KJV), to be the author. There is indeed a tradition that David wrote many of the psalms, but the Bible makes no claim that he wrote them all. Texts such as 1 Chronicles 16, 2 Chron. 29:25-30, and Ezra 3:10 all associate David with the establishment of music as an integral part of Israel’s worship, but he is properly seen as a patron and encourager of Israel’s music and liturgy, not its sole author.

No less than 116 of the psalms have superscriptions in the Hebrew text, including 87 of the first 100. These are old traditions but not as old as the psalms themselves: they were added by later scribes and should not be considered a part of the original text. In some cases, what appears to be a superscription for one psalm may originally have been a postscript for the previous one. In the LXX, other superscriptions were added to all but the first two psalms. Some superscriptions appear to give instructions to the musicians or song leaders regarding which instruments or tune is to be played.

Among the superscriptions, 101 include attributive names, and *ledavid* appears 73 times. This doesn’t necessarily mean “by David,” however. The Hebrew prefix *l* more typically means “to” or “for,” rather than “by.” It could mean “of” in reference to a collection. Psalms are also attributed to (or for) Asaph (12), the sons of Korah (11), and Solomon (2), plus Heman, Ethan, and Moses (1 each).

Date

Determining a date for the writing of the Psalms is tricky business. Some psalms could be as old as two centuries before David and others may be as late as the fifth century, looking back after the exile. There is more evidence of early Hebrew than late.

The presence of the “Elohistic psalter” makes it clear that the psalms were rather fluid and subject to some changes as time went on. And, a few psalms appear in slightly different form in other parts of the Bible. Psalm 18, for example, also appears in 2 Samuel 22 as a song of David. Jer. 17:5-8 contains much of the same material found in Psalm 1, where it has been transformed into a song.

The appearance of an obvious wisdom teaching as the first psalm could suggest that the wisdom school had some influence on the final shape of the psalter.

Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

We should point out that psalms and hymns were not unique to Israel. Hymns of various sorts are known from Ugarit, Sumeria, Babylonia, and Egypt. It is often noted, for example, that Psalm 104 has some similarities to the Egyptian Hymn to Aten.

While space does not allow us to provide examples of other hymns from the ancient Near East, readers should be aware that hymnic prayers were not unique to Israel. Occasionally, we may note a similarity of expressions found in Hebrew psalms and poetry from neighboring cultures.

General Characteristics, Theology

The psalms are not only to be understood as poetry, and as songs, but also as prayers. Most of them address either petitions or complaints to God. A few are addressed to other people, but in order to call upon them to celebrate God's power or to follow God's law.

Some of the psalms are clearly cultic and designed for official occasions, even something like the coronation of a king. Others appear to be very personal, such as the penitent Psalm 51.

Although themes such as wisdom, covenant, repentance, and Torah are often found in the psalms, the central theological theme is the presence of God—either giving thanks for God's presence or pleading for God's presence.

Setting/Function

What was the function of the psalms in Israel? When and where and how were they used?

We presume that they eventually wound up in Jerusalem and were used in cultic ceremonies through the temple, but some of them may have originated in other settings. For example, Psalm 74 speaks of an exilic setting after the destruction of the temple, and Psalm 81 may have originated in the Northern Kingdom (it speaks much of "Israel"). And, if Psalms 18 and 60 were not written prior to the establishment of the temple, they are designed to appear that way, as prayers of David when he was in a tight spot. A number of the psalms appear to have been composed for particular purposes on special days.

Priests, prophets, wisdom teachers, and other worshipers may have contributed psalms. The emphasis on David's role in promoting music may suggest that collections of psalms first began under David's sponsorship. Later, others were added, and they were reorganized.

Types of Psalms

Hermann Gunkel, the great German form critic, pioneered the application of form criticism to the psalms, and identified a variety of different types (*gattungen*) of psalms. Although our interpretation of a psalm is not limited by its primary type, it is helpful to compare a psalm with others of a similar type.

We can identify both major types of psalms, and varieties of related types within them. Sometimes a psalm will contain elements of multiple types. And, as one might expect, scholars do not always agree on what psalms belong to what type.

Hymns and psalms of praise constitute the largest category. About 74 of the 150 psalms focus on praise to God. They typically begin with a call to praise God, and then list reasons why one should offer praise, often concluding with a closing call to praise.

Laments make up the next group. About 56 psalms are of this type, most of them (40) being individual prayers of lamentation, the most frequent single type. These may spring from different contexts. They typically begin with a cry for hearing or expression of certainty that God will hear. They plead with God for deliverance, usually express trust that God will hear their prayer, and offer words of praise in advance of it actually happening. The lessons in this book are drawn from the psalms of lament.

Royal psalms relate directly to the Davidic dynasty and its rule in Jerusalem. These include Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144.

Wisdom psalms reflect Israel's wisdom traditions. These include Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, and 133.

With this great variety of material, the Psalms have something for everyone: psalms for happy days and sad days, confident days and questioning days, days of celebration and days when it seems that God is hiding. As we read how Israel's poets testified of their encounters with God—especially in times of trial or sorrow—we find that we have not only gained knowledge of God, but also learned something about ourselves.

NOTES

¹Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat* (Random House, 1957).

²*De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (1753), refined by G. Buchanan Gray in *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915).

³Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 88.