

Introducing the Old Testament

Worksheet for Week 5

Psalms

Our study topic for this week is Hebrew poetry and the book of Psalms. This book of poetry is one of the most-used books in the Old Testament. I suggest you begin by first reading the chapter on the psalms in Philip Yancey's book. Then, read the introduction to Psalms in your study bible and, if you have one, the entry on the book in your Bible dictionary. Then read through the daily Psalms suggested on this worksheet, most of which are touched upon in Yancey's book. You might also read a few psalms using the New Living Translation or Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

Hebrew Poetry

Most of us don't read much poetry and most of us don't know how to read it. Knowing how poetry is put together can help us surmount some of the barriers to understanding and appreciation. This is no less true for Hebrew poetry than it is for contemporary poetry. However, Hebrew poetry is not put together the way English poetry is put together. For example, I like poems that rhyme ~ but this is not how Hebrew poetry was written.

In their survey of the Old Testament, Hill and Walton¹ note that there are two principal characteristics of Hebrew poetry: rhythm of thought and rhythm of sound.

Rhythm of thought is the balancing of ideas in some structured form. Here are a few examples provided by Hill and Walton:

- Using synonyms
Psalm 24:2
for he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters.
- Using metaphors
Psalm 18:31
For who is God besides the LORD?
And who is the Rock except our God?
- Using word order
Psalm 1:2
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
- Using parallel parts of speech
Psalm 19:7-8
The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making the wise simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

There are many more examples of techniques that the Hebrew poets used to create a rhythm in the expression of their thoughts. We need to keep this in mind when we are reading the poems. Look for the big point; listen for what it says to your heart. The psalms resist a detailed analysis of each word and phrase.

The poets also used a variety of techniques to create a *rhythm of sound* in the poem. Some of the psalms are acrostics, in which the first letters of succeeding lines or stanzas spell out the alphabet, a word, or a phrase. Sometimes the poets used alliteration, in which each word begins with the same consonant. The poets also used a lot of word plays. Unfortunately, nearly all of this is lost when the Hebrew is translated into another language. Many commentaries on the Psalms can help you see the poet's art.

¹ Hill, Andrew E. & Walton, John H. *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000)

Bible Readings for Week 5

Before reading each psalm, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the poetry or a few feelings that the psalm evokes in you.

Day 1 Psalms 9 & 10 (really a single psalm of thanksgiving and lament, an acrostic)	Day 2 Psalm 91
Day 3 Psalms 22 & 23	Day 4 Psalm 119:1-16 and 169-176 (the longest Psalm and an elaborate acrostic)
Day 5 Psalm 71	Weekly Prayer Concerns