



SCHOOL FOR MINISTRY
The Episcopal Diocese of San Diego

HEBREW BIBLE 2

10. The Psalms

David Moseley, Ph.D.

This week we turn to the great repository of poetry in the Hebrew Bible called the Psalms. In the Hebrew Bible they are called *Tehillim* (“praises”), but we use the Greek name *Psalmoi* (songs played on a stringed instrument, close to our idea of “lyrics”, which is literally words written to be accompanied by a lyre), thus suggesting the predominant use of these texts as ancient hymns in the liturgical life of Judaism. Although many of the psalms are attributed to King David (who was a skilled lyre [harp] player), as well as other named individuals, it’s hard to know whether any of these claims are genuine or not. Most scholars believe that these texts were passed on orally and re-written and refined over the course of the first half of the millennium B.C.E. They were certainly known to many of the prophets (especially Isaiah), and are the most frequently quoted Hebrew Bible text in the Christian Scriptures. They have been a continuously used mode of prayer, worship and spiritual expression for Jews and Christians for almost three thousand years – and remain one of the finest single collections of poetry in all world literature, exploring the full spectrum and extremes of human experience, insight and emotion in the context of a creature’s spiritual relationship with their Creator.

Assignment #10 for Class on Saturday 3rd November 2018

Reading

First, please read the “Introduction to the Poetical and Wisdom Books” essay in your NRSV Bible (pp. 721-725 in 4th Ed.; pp. 729-733 in 5th Ed.), focusing particularly on the section of Biblical Poetry; then read through the introduction to the Psalms in your NRSV Bible. Please read through as many of the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible as you can. Ideally, the Psalms ought to be *listened* to, either as poetry read aloud – or even better, as musical settings. [The Anglican musical tradition includes many fine musical settings of the psalms, in unison or four-part choral harmony, which you can find on YouTube – some of my favorites include Byrd, Britten, Gibbons, Howells, Noble, Parry, Purcell, Rutter, Stanford, Tallis, Taverner, and Vaughan Williams.]

There are five anthologies of Psalms corresponding to the Torah: (1) 1-41; (2) 42-72; (3) 73-89; (4) 90-106; and (5) 107-150. It’s possible to categorize many of the Psalms by genre – the three most popular “types” are *Hymns* (Calls to Worship), *Petitions & Laments* (Individual or Communal), and *Thanksgivings*. More than half of the Psalms can be categorized thus – although you can find other genres as well such as Royal Songs, Zion Songs, Festival Songs, and Liturgies. Any list of the “Best Psalms” is bound to be subjective – but if you’re looking for the “Greatest Hits”, that list ought to include: 1, 9, 18, 16, 19, 22, 23, 27, 30, 32, 34, 35, 37, 40, 42, 46, 51, 55, 57, 62, 63, 64, 69, 73, 84, 86, 89, 91, 104, 105, 113, 118, 119, 121, 127, 137, 138, 139 and 150. Use the annotations and notes in your Bible as an aid to understanding and interpretation.

Thinking & Responding

For this week's Response Paper, I would like you to Pick your favorite Psalm (**NOT** Psalm 23!!! It's the *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Stairway to Heaven* of the Psalms) and Write a Short Paper Analyzing the Main Themes, Poetic Imagery and Literary Techniques of that Psalm, like a Mini-Exegesis, or a Critical Evaluation of a work of literature. You can use scholarly, reputable internet sources to help you with your research...and I will send you some commentary material once I know which Psalm you have selected. Please write your Response in approximately 500 words (12-point font, double-spaced, one-inch margin, with your name at the top of the paper). Type up and print your Reflections, and be ready to share and discuss your Psalm Analysis in class in a 5-7 minute presentation (no SlideShows – just you talking about the text, probably reading your paper). I will collect them in to review and grade at the end of the class.

Please e-mail me which Psalm you have selected as soon as possible so we can have five different Psalms to discuss – it will be first come, first served for Psalm selection!!