

Beyond Literary Devices

Introduction to *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*

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The Book of Psalms, in both its original Hebrew and in its numerous translations, is probably the best known book of the Hebrew Bible. For more than two millennia it has captivated and inspired a wide variety of readers and worshipers. Subsequent attempts in the Western tradition to create moving liturgical poems be either private or public devotions, do not replicate the expressive force of Psalms.

Existing literary analyses that explain the enduring influence of Psalms do not tell the whole story. Attributing their startlingly expressive power to the “genius” of the Psalmist, introduces a romantic term that explains little; the traditional attribution of the authorship of Psalms to David is more a salute to their majesty than an assertion of historical fact of the fixing of a date. After all, both the superscriptions (the initial verse of the psalm that often indicates authorship) and medieval assign the Psalms to different authors, in addition to David. We are therefore dealing not with individual authorship, but with a long and venerable tradition spanning over 500 years. To claim, on the other hand, that we can explain their unequaled expressive power by identifying a cluster of literary devices like metaphor and repetition may be helpful, even necessary, but does not offer a truly satisfying explanation. These same literary devices, after all, are present in many other types of sophisticated literary expression that are not as gripping as Psalms and thus fall short of explaining the uniqueness of the Psalms.

We must, I believe, go beyond these literary devices, beyond artfulness, beyond authorship, to recognize two salient characteristics of the Psalms. First, the Psalms embody a coherent view of a world governed by a single powerful, providential God, one who cares for human needs and attends to human prayer and praise. Second, we cannot escape the distinctive voice of the “Psalmist” – that is the tradition of authors of the various Psalms, whoever they might be. This voice both speaks to an attentive God and allows the worshipful person to use the voice for his or her own communication.

It is important to remember that we refer to the author of Psalms or of individual psalms as “the Psalmist.” We do so deliberately since – despite centuries of attribution of the authorship of Psalms to King David, or, according to the super-scripture on many

psalms, to other authors, modern scholarship has long concluded that we can never prove Davidic authorship of the Psalms. Similarly, we cannot date most psalms on the basis of internal evidence – the only evidence we have. (The famous Psalm 137, “By the waters of Babylon,” is a possible exception.) It is more usual today, and more fruitful, to treat psalms as a long and venerable tradition of composition starting, perhaps at the end of the second millennium, B.C.E. and extending even to the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1st century B.C.E. The authors of various psalms might be anonymous – hence we call them merely “psalmists” – but they were very faithful to the powerful literary tradition they inherited and practiced with consummate skill.

In order to penetrate the mystery of psalmic expression, and understand the dynamic power of the psalms, we will look at some of their key literary components: clear, direct imagery; rhythmic balance; and a deft use of the verbless declarative sentence. We begin by analyzing the basic unit, the simple psalmic utterance, found in the best known verse of Psalms, the first verse of Psalm 23 (without the added superscription: A Psalm of David [*mizmor leDavid*]): “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (*Adonai ro’i, lo ehsor*). The four word (in Hebrew) declaration comprises two 2-word balanced phrases which, in turn, comprise the kernel of Psalms – and much more. In “the Lord [is] my shepherd,” the speaker declares that there is a specific Lord (*’Adonai*), and that *’Adonai* has a providential relationship to the speaker: *’Adonai* is his shepherd. The metaphor “shepherd” is very simple, traditional, accessible to all, shepherds and urban dwellers alike. The Lord is specific, one, providential — in brief, the monotheistic God who emerges in the Hebrew Bible in the first millennium B.C.E. The speaker clearly believes in this providential God since he can immediately state unambiguously “I shall not want.”

The logical sequence is inescapable. The Hebrew actually says in two words: *’Adonai ro’i, ’Adonai* my-shepherd (with the possessive suffix). This first phrase in Hebrew has no verb since there is no present tense of the verb “to be” in the Hebrew Bible. The union of “God” and “my-shepherd” is close: they are semantically united and charged. Furthermore, the connection with the second phrase “I shall not want (*lo ’ehsor*) is declarative, not hypothetical. The speaker does not say: “If the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” There is no “if” here, but rather a declarative sentence with two parts, the second a result of the first. Finally, the simple grammar implies a profound meaning: while the Lord exists and is providential, He is not alone in the world. He is accompanied by the speaker who declares his trust in Him.

Simple yet forceful, straightforward yet complex, this four word declaration speaks to anyone for whom there is a monotheistic, providential God. To show how this basic statement can be developed into a longer, more complex and integrated Psalm, we move to Psalm 8 which has also inspired one of the illustrations in this volume.

O Lord, our God, How majestic is Your Name throughout the earth,
You who have covered the heavens with Your splendor!
From the mouths of infants and sucklings
You have founded strength on account of Your foes,
to put an end to enemy and avenger.
When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and the stars that You set in place,
what is man that You have been mindful of him,
mortal man that You have taken note of him,
that you have made him little less than divine,
and adorned him with glory and majesty;
You have made him master over Your handiwork,
laying the world at his feet,
sheep and oxen, all of them,
and wild beasts, too;
the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea,
whatever travels the paths of the seas,
O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!

Psalm 8 begins like a classic example of a Psalm of praise, marveling at God's majesty and power as manifested in the heavens, and beginning and ending with the same verse. About halfway through the Psalm, however, attention abruptly turns from God to human beings, from the majesty of God to the wonders of mankind. While the psalm is rich in many of the traditional literary devices found in most psalms – and in much of Biblical Hebrew poetry, such as concrete imagery, repetitions, and parallel verses (in which the second of two verse couplets echoes the first in both rhythm and meaning), it is distinguished by its coherence based on the two-fold logic of wonder: humankind wonders at the splendors of creation, and within it is the marvel of mortal man, only “a little less than divine.”

The speaker begins by reciting his awe at the presence of creation, specifically the heavens with its moon and stars, but then uses this awe, which implies the

insignificance of all mankind (including the speaker) to raise the challenging question: “What is man that You have been mindful of him?” In other words, why should the magnificent God bother with insignificant man, so clearly puny in comparison with the awe-inspiring heavens? Yet we see that God obviously has, since man has been given mastery of all God’s living creations. Logically, in comparison with the awe-inspiring heavens, man is puny, but, nevertheless, God has endowed humankind with great gifts, has made humans “little less than divine.” The Psalm praises God’s majesty in the opening verse (2) and the closing verse (10), but attributes a similar quality to man in verse 6. (The Hebrew *hōd* in 2 and 10 is echoed in a close synonym, *hadar* in verse 6.) Man’s majesty is exemplified by his mastery over God’s handiwork, specifically over all the living beings on earth: animals, birds, and fish. And yet, after expressing his wonder at the majesty of mankind, the Psalmist closes this psalm by repeating the opening verse: O Lord, our God, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!” God’s majesty is thus first exemplified by the awe-inspiring heavens, but then by the creation of man who is, in himself, majestic since he has been chosen by God over all other creatures, and has been endowed with the gifts of mastery. This complex, comparative structure exemplifies God’s choosing man, a privilege that implies a close, dynamic relationship.

Psalm 8 thus presents a presentation of a basic problem of the monotheistic cluster of notions together with its solution: If the world has been created and governed by one omnipotent God, what place is there for humankind? The solution, we have seen, is relatively simple and involves the comforting notion of a providential God who privileges mankind. Far more difficult, it would seem, is the problem of evil: How does one understand the problem of human suffering in such a world? While this problem has vexed, and still vexes the adherents of monotheism for centuries, it seems that this is not an acute problem for the Psalmist. We encounter an awareness of enemies, of fear of abandonment, of national catastrophes. All these are accompanied by deep anguish, but they seem to be temporary situations which evoke fervent prayer leading to ultimate help. Note the anguish in the familiar verses of Psalm 22:

My God, my God,
Why have You abandoned me;
Why so far from delivering me
And from my anguished roaring?

After many moving verses, this same speaker can say in verse 25:

For He did not scorn, He did not spurn
the pleas of the lowly;
He did not hide His face from him;
When he cried out to Him, He listened.

In these moments God seems to be absent and the speaker yearns for His presence. Significantly, the Psalmist has no words for “presence” or “absence,” abstract concepts developed in Athens. He speaks of God’s “face” and God’s “hiding His face” from him. Note the standard formula in Psalm 13.

How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?

Just as God can hide His face, He can reveal His face. God listens to supplications and returns to help the petitioner.

The concreteness of the situation, the “hidden face “ (*hester panim*) and its return to human vision is characteristic of the world of the Psalmist, for whom God is addressed as an intimate “you” not the You (capitalized) we ordinarily use in English translation. In a world not yet diluted by abstractions, the speaker’s voice can more readily be assimilated by any believer who chooses to perform the utterance of the Psalms for his own needs. The sophisticated imagery, the stirring rhythms, and reinforcing repetitions all effect the verses, but the voice of the Psalmist resounds beyond them through his fresh belief in this providential God.

In preparing for my literary introduction to each psalm, I have read many commentaries, both medieval and modern. While I have gained much from their insights, the formulation of each analysis is in my voice and my responsibility. I have tried to address both the initiate to Psalms and the experienced reader; those who have no Hebrew knowledge and those familiar with the original text. Each psalm invites its specific response; although they all share the same glorious tradition, each is unique. Finally, despite my detailed analyses of the workings of literary devices in these devotional poems, there still remain areas of literary response that are beyond literary devices.

Throughout the entire Book of Psalms, we are immersed in poetic language that suggests a sophisticated poetic tradition, but this does not explain the uncanny durability of the psalms throughout the ages. The psalmists captured and rendered a wide range of religious sentiments that are perennially relevant and meaningful to a worshipper. Above all, they believed in a caring, predictable God who was open to the

supplication of human beings, God's own creatures, yet expected them to worship God. The composition and recitation of psalms was not merely an aesthetic exercise. It was an act of devotion.