

The Use of Psalms in Worship

A Leader Reader by David Gambrell

A Brief History

The book of Psalms (or Psalter) has been called the hymnal (or prayer book) of ancient Israel. Composed and collected over a period of five hundred years (roughly 1000 to 500 BCE), the 150 biblical psalms are divided into five books, patterned after the five books of the Torah. Scholars categorize the psalms under a variety of literary types or genres, including hymns of praise, songs of thanksgiving, prayers of lament, wisdom psalms, and royal psalms; some of these genres are further subdivided into communal and individual types and categorized according to their use in temple worship or at annual festivals. This remarkable collection of poetry, prayer, and praise reflects a broad range of religious faith, liturgical life, and historical experience for the people of Israel.

The psalms have had a significant place in Christian life and liturgy as well. Along with Isaiah, the book of Psalms is one of the most quoted books of Hebrew Scripture in the New Testament. Jesus makes reference to the psalms in a number of places—notably, in his cry from the cross (Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:34; cf. Ps. 22:1). Acts, the epistles, and Revelation are replete with allusions to the psalms. Early Christians understood the psalms as prophecy concerning Jesus (Luke 24:44); we also know that they sang psalms in their services of worship (Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16).

The psalms came to have an important role in monastic life as they were chanted in prayer throughout the day. Musical settings of certain verses from the psalms (in Latin) were also a significant part of the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Mass. In the sixteenth century, Protestant Reformers such as John Calvin insisted that biblical songs—primarily the psalms, but also certain canticles, such as the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29–32)—were the

Prayer

Eternal God,
Author of our life
and End of our pilgrimage:
Guide us by your Word and Spirit
amid all perils and temptations,
that we may not wander from your way,
nor stumble in the darkness;
but may finish our course in safety,
and come to our eternal rest in you;
through the grace and merit of Jesus Christ our
Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy
Spirit,
one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

—*Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY:
Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 363.

only appropriate music for worship. From this legacy came a wealth of metrical paraphrases of the psalms in vernacular languages, including the Genevan Psalter (1562), the Bay Psalm Book (1640), the Scottish Psalter (1650), and the hymns of Isaac Watts (1707); a number of the texts and tunes from these collections have found their way into contemporary hymnals.

Psalms in Sunday Worship

The ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary (published in 1992) includes a selection from the psalms for each Sunday and festival of the Christian year. Occasionally, another biblical song or canticle replaces the psalm, as in the case of the Song of Mary (Luke

1:46–55) in Advent. The psalm is intended to be not a separate Scripture lesson but a response (ideally a musical response) to the First Reading, usually from the Old Testament (during the season of Easter the Old Testament reading is replaced by a reading from Acts). In this role, the psalm serves to reinforce the themes of the Old Testament reading, reframing them as prayerful response.

Psalms show up in many other places in the service for the Lord's Day. Because they express joyful praise and lend themselves so readily to responsive reading, they are frequently used as Calls to Worship or Opening Sentences (see Psalm 118:24 or 124:8). The penitential psalms (see Psalm 51) may be used or adapted for the Confession of Sin. Because the psalms represent the faithful and authentic prayers of the people of Israel through a wide array of joys and sorrows in personal and communal life, they provide evocative images and biblical inspiration for Thanksgiving and Intercession, or the Prayers of the People.

Preaching from the psalms is an issue that deserves special attention. Some assert that it is inappropriate to preach on the lectionary psalms, as their poetic and musical structure does not translate well into homiletical reflection. Indeed, in the design of the Revised Common Lectionary, there are not four lessons but three lessons and a psalm, intended as a musical response. However, we have noted that early Christians interpreted the psalms as prophetic writings related to Jesus, and we know that early church leaders and Protestant Reformers alike preached from the book of Psalms. Perhaps the best counsel is this: if you choose to preach on psalms from time to time, let that not eclipse their liturgical use as musical prayer and praise.

The Way of Church

A church is a place where we try to think, speak, and act in God's way, not in the way of a fear-filled world. A church is a home for love, a home for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity, to rest and be healed, to let go their defenses and be free—free from worries, free from tensions, free to laugh, free to cry.

—William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 140.

Singing the Psalms

The psalms are meant to be sung, and there are numerous ways of doing so. Some editions of the Psalter are designed for chanting: singing simple, repetitive melodies in a natural speaking rhythm. These editions have “pointed” texts (small dots under certain syllables in each line) indicating where the melody changes. This is an approach especially well suited for small worshiping groups in daily prayer, but with a little practice congregations can learn to chant the psalms as well. Often, a cantor will chant the verses of the psalm and the congregation will join in singing a refrain. Alternately, the congregation may be divided into two groups, taking turns singing the verses of the psalm back and forth (antiphonally) across a center aisle.

Metrical settings of psalms (see “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need,” Isaac Watts's setting of Psalm 23) have a long and important history in Reformed worship. In recent years, however, this tradition has languished. The 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* has an excellent collection of metrical psalms (numbers 158–258 and a few others scattered throughout the hymnal) that are often overlooked—either because we have simply gotten out of the habit of singing the psalms in Sunday worship or because we are unsure about how they might relate to other parts of worship. These hymnic psalm settings may be sung as musical responses to the Old Testament or Acts reading, using the appropriate lectionary psalm. Many of them will also work well in other places in the service: as hymns of praise, responses to the sermon, Communion hymns, or sending songs.

A growing corpus of contemporary, Taizé, and global songs based on psalms has further enriched the palette and expanded the possibilities. We can now sing the psalms in ways that transcend generations, cross cultures, embrace ecumenical partners, and encircle the globe—joining a living tradition that reaches back through three thousand years of Jewish and Christian worship.

Resources for Study, Prayer, and Worship

Commentaries

Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, revised and expanded (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

Walter Bruggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985).

Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Journey Through the Psalms* (Chalice Press, 2002).

John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

Resources for Prayer

Presbyterian Book of Common Worship (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); includes most of the 150 psalms along with psalm prayers.

Presbyterian Book of Common Worship Daily Prayer (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); this is a smaller, more portable volume, including all the psalms and psalm prayers from the BCW as well as the liturgies for daily prayer.

Musical Settings

The Presbyterian Hymnal (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); see especially 158–258.

The Psalter: Psalms and Canticles for Singing (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

The Psalter, Choral Edition: Psalms and Canticles for Singing (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Michael Morgan, *Psalter for Christian Worship* (Witherspoon Press, 1999).

Hal H. Hopson, *The People's Psalter* (MorningStar Music Publishers, 2008).

About the Writer

David Gambrell is associate for worship in the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He is a graduate of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and a candidate for the PhD in liturgical studies at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.