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 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

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.

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.

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**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**


**About the Writer**

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