

The Book of Praises

Opening Hymn: #235 — “Praise Our King”

When the Old Testament Book of Praises was translated into Greek by the Septuagint translators, they changed the name from "praises" to "psalms" the name now used in most non-Hebrew Bibles.

"Praise" is a good one-word description of the Psalms. The English word in its many forms appears more times in the psalms than in all the other books of the Bible combined.* Generally titles in small print that have the word psalm [e.g. Psalm 9: A **psalm** of David] are Strong's #4210 meaning a poem set to music.

Here is Psalm 100's celebration of praise. Note the imperative form of the verbs, the form used to give orders. Praising the Lord is what we 're supposed to do. (*Emphasize the verbs.*)

MAKE a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.

SERVE the Lord with gladness.

COME before His presence with singing.

KNOW ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.

ENTER into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise:

BE THANKFUL unto Him, and bless His name. For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting; and His truth endureth to all generations.

The psalms are poetry. In English we generally expect poems to rhyme and to have a kind of beat or rhythm. Although poems can be much appreciated by those who know the language, it is very hard to translate them and preserve both rhythm and rhyme. That's because the equivalent words in another language generally don't rhyme.

So how do you translate a hymn that is to be sung to the same music, and still have it rhyme? Answer: you take liberties with the words:

English #237

Praise the Lord ye heav'ns, adore him;
Praise him, angels in the height;
Sun and moon rejoice before him;
Praise him, all ye stars of light.

French #5

Praise the Lord under the heavens
Glorify Him by singing
In a choir let us unite our voices
By praising him at all times.

In spite of translation difficulties the poetic Hebrew psalms have been prized by everyone regardless of what language in which they're read. Vivid parallel repetition of thoughts and ideas formed the basis of the poetic form, and that translates very well:

* 32 times in N.T.; 65 times in O.T. [NOT Psalms] ; 128 times in Psalms.

ENTER... into His gates with thanksgiving,
into His courts with praise.

He gathered as in a bottle the waters of the sea,
putting the deeps in storehouses.
(Psalm 33:7, Eaton's trans.)

Some psalms were constructed with poetic constraints. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 25 and 34 have 22 verses [lines] each starting with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Of course an English poet would have to write 26 lines to duplicate this effect. In Psalm 119 the poet took each Hebrew letter in turn and wrote eight lines each beginning with that same letter (so the entire psalm consists of $8 \times 22 = 176$ verses). Clearly that effect can't generally be translated, but here's one expert's attempt at verses 129-136 where the translation begins each verse with the letter P. (You might follow in the King James to see how cleverly the translation was done.) Psalm 119:129-ff:

Promises from you are marvelous, so I guard them with my life.
Putting forth meaning, your word gives light, making wise the simple.
Panting with open lips I thirst and long for your commands.
Peace be on me from your merciful face, after your rule for lovers of your name!
Plant my feet right by your speaking to me and let no evil take power over me!
Preserve me from man's oppression that I may keep your principles!
Pour light from your face on your servant and teach me your decrees!
'Plashing waters, my tears drop down that men have not kept your teaching.

Experts say the craftsmanship of the psalms is highly sophisticated and represent high art. Centuries ago people appreciated them so much that many memorized all of them. So if one began a quotation from a psalm, the rest of the words would flood into the mind to complete it. I understand that at one time prelates in the Church of England had to know them all by heart.

There is a wonderful economy of communication when everyone has memorized them. Our Lord, for example, had only to utter the opening words of Psalm 22-- "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"--and listeners would instantly find words flooding into their minds:

vs. 7: They that see me laugh me to scorn. saying, "He trusted on the Lord that He would deliver him, let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him."

vs. 14: I am poured out like water, all my bones are out of joint.

vs. 16: The assembly of the wicked have enclosed me, they pierced my hands and feet.

vs. 18: They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.

Suddenly some might see that this psalm does not describe David's experiences. It is a prophecy of Messiah. Although it begins with suffering, it ends with victory over death and the blessings that are to flow to the world in the kingdom. The last words of this psalm are: "It is finished." [See note in *Companion Bible*.] Thus our Lord could give a marvelous testimony to those gathered near the cross by simply uttering the opening words, then later the final words of this psalm. Memory would supply all the other words and perhaps with it a realization of the psalm's prophetic significance.

David as Psalmist

We say this psalm does not describe David's experiences, but who says David wrote it? Those who haven't thought about it might think David wrote all the psalms:

2 Sam. 23:1 Now these be the last words of David . . . the sweet psalmist of Israel.

But on closer examination, there's no question that David did not write a great many psalms. However, the fine print at the start of Psalm 22 says "A Psalm of David." Are those words inspired? They have no verse number in our English Bible, though the French Bible does assign a verse number to those captions.

In 2 Samuel 22 we find the words of a song that are spoken by David to the Lord. If you read it, you'd think it was in fact a psalm, even though it is not in the Book of Psalms. But in fact it is! Psalm 18 is an almost word-for-word duplicate; the fine print of Psalm 18 identifies it as a psalm of David. Experts disagree about whether the fine print can always be trusted. Apparently such words are very old. In at least one other instance we have proof the words identifying the author are correct:

Luke 20:42 And David himself saith in the book of Psalms, "The Lord said unto my Lord, sit Thou on my right hand until I make thine enemies thy footstool."

Jesus is quoting the first verse of Psalm 110 and he says David is the author. Because Jesus speaks only the words the Father gave him to speak (John 12:49), we can be absolutely sure he's right. The fine print at the start of Psalm 110 says it is "A Psalm of David." About half the psalms have a similar identification. The oldest psalm is Psalm 90, and there the fine print says it is "A Prayer of Moses, the man of God."

So we see that the psalms are not just praise; they are also prayers. In fact, the last verse of Psalm 72 says: "The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended." This marked the end of one collection, or book, of psalms. Originally there were five such books and all were combined to make what we call the Book of Psalms. This division into "books" is not identified in the King James, but it is in the NIV and others. Following Psalm 72, the NIV Bible says "Book III." *

We can't be positive about the order and even which psalms were in the scriptures used by the Lord and the apostles, but these words from the Apostle Paul are instructive:

Acts 13:33 God hath . . . raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.

What's interesting is that it was the second psalm in Paul's Bible and it is the second psalm in ours. However, this is the only place where a psalm was identified by number. Often quotes were not identified as coming from the psalms, though because of memorization, most everyone surely knew it. Here's a typical example:

Heb. 2:6 But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man that thou art mindful of him...

* The end of the other books is after Psalm 41, 89, and 106.

The "one" doing the testifying is the author of Psalm 8 which the fine print identifies as "A Psalm of David." Our Lord and the apostles were not the only ones who quoted from the psalms. The only time Satan quotes scripture, he picks a psalm:

Matt. 4:5-7 Then the devil . . . setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, "He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone."

The memory of the adversary must have been a bit weak because he omits one phrase from Psalm 91 and adds one of his own. Even so, by making such a quotation he acknowledges the prophetic application of the psalms and that they were talking about a "greater than David" who would eventually come on the scene. It was probably this that inspired William Shakespeare to write:

The devil can cite scripture for his purpose. An evil soul producing holy witness is like a villain with a smiling cheek, a goodly apple rotten at the heart. O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath! [Antonio speaking in *Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 3.]

If the adversary had continued the quotation, he would have had to say: "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder [or serpent]." This would bring him uncomfortably close to what he heard in the garden when God said that the seed of the woman would bruise [crush] his head. (Gen. 3:15) So, being a diplomat, he stopped where he did.

The Psalms as Prophecy

None of us prove our doctrines by quoting the words of a hymn. But the psalms are not ordinary hymns. They are inspired by the Holy Spirit and have all the validity of prophecy.

Luke 24:44 And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the **psalms**, concerning me.

Our Lord and the apostles quoted or referred to specific psalms at least 70 times, more than any other Old Testament book. [Isaiah with 55 references is in second place.] Without question the psalms were considered the equal of any prophetic utterance. When the disciples were concerned with Judas' apostasy, Peter stood up and said:

Acts 1:20 For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his office let another take.

Notice how the book of Hebrews begins:

Heb. 1:1 God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the **prophets** hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, whom He hath appointed Heir of all things. [now we skip to vs. 8 which is one in a series of examples of prophetic words] But unto the Son He saith [and here starts a quote from Psalm 45], Thy throne O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness and hated

iniquity; therefore God, even Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows.

Some commentators have suggested that Psalm 45 was written to commemorate an actual wedding of a Jewish king. That is, however, beside the point. Hebrews 1:8 makes it clear that its value rests in its prophetic significance concerning the Son. When seen in that light we can appreciate much more. As we see beginning in verse 14, the Son marries a bride who comes in with her companions, and those considered "fathers" are made princes in all the earth. This pictures the kingdom with Christ as king of kings, the church at his right hand, the great company with her, and ancient patriarchs or "fathers" who are made the visible princely representatives of the earthly phase of the kingdom.

The prophetic value of the psalms can be dramatically shown in the unique reference to Melchizedek in Psalm 110. It was this verse that provided the insight into how Melchizedek typified Christ:

Psa. 110:4 The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

These words are quoted in Hebrews 5:6 and 7:17,21 as proof of the superiority of the new Melchizedek order of priesthood compared to the obsolete Aaronic priesthood. But if we did not have this single text in Psalm 110, there would be no proof, and we would not have received the blessing associated with this important doctrine as it is presented in the book of Hebrews.

At the conclusion of the last supper the little group sang a hymn and went out. (Matt. 26:30) Undoubtedly they sang a psalm. Although the account doesn't say which psalm was sung, I like the suggestion that it might well have been Psalm 118. It has wonderful prophetic significance. Although the disciples might not make the connection to Jesus at the time they sang it, they would understand when they received the Holy Spirit. That psalm contains a particularly obscure reference:

Psa. 118:22 The stone which the builders refused is become the head of the corner.

When Peter was brought before the high priest and asked how he was able to work miracle cures, he quotes this verse and applies it to Jesus Christ. (See Acts 4:11) This certainly was not something he could have done prior to Pentecost.

Rev. 19:7 Let us be glad and rejoice and give honour to Him for the marriage of the Lamb is come and His wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.

This Revelation chapter opens with the sound of great praise. The shout of "Alleluia" from those whom verse 1 calls "much people" is the voice of the Great Company who are "**in heaven**" (vs. 1). (The phrase "great multitude" is used in verse 6.) This is the only place where we find the word "[h]alleluia" in the Bible. But it is not a Greek word. Rather it is the transliteration of two Hebrew words: halle-Jah. That means "Praise God" and is found many times in the psalms*. The last five psalms are called the Hallelujah psalms because they all begin and end with "Hallelujah" (translated "Praise ye the Lord").

* Found in 102:18; 104:35; 105:45; 106:1,48; 111:1; 112:1; 113:1,9; 115:18; 117:2; 118:19; 135:1,3,21; 146:1,10; 147:1,20; 148:1,14; 149:1,9; 150:1,6--for a total of 34 times out of 38 occurrences of Strong's #3050.

Praise

Today we don't talk much about praise. Yes, we do have "prayer, praise, and testimony" meetings, but too often there are long silences when no one seems to have much to say. We do sing songs of praise, but sometimes only the first and last verses, and not even that if we're running short of time. Why? Are we embarrassed by "Hallelujah"? Maybe our first love is getting a bit old.

Do you remember what your first love was like? No? Then think about someone you've known who was head-over-heels in love. All he can talk about is his beloved. "Isn't she grand?" "Have you ever seen anyone more wonderful than she?" "Don't you just want to hug her?" Woe to you if you don't agree with these judgments.

That's how the psalms celebrate God.

Hallelujah. Praise ye the Lord from the heavens: praise him in the heights.

Praise ye him, all his angels: praise ye him, all his hosts.

Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light.

Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens.

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded, and they were created.

--Psalm 148:1-5 [*first third of it*]

"Isn't He grand?" "Could there be anyone more wonderful than He?" These are the words of someone in love. What do you think when you hear words of praise from your children, or grandchildren? You react to the love radiating out from the one speaking the words. We were made in the image of God, so we can understand that God similarly reacts to the expressions of love and praise we render to Him.

Heb. 13:15,16 By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Some may grow tired and forget how important it is to render praise to God:

Rev. 2:4 Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

This was written to the church at Ephesus. You'd think it was Laodicea. Actually it's a problem that's shared by all the churches, by all who have named the name of Christ and who have vowed to love him above all others.

If you're having trouble recognizing things that justify praising God, start back at the very beginning. Soon you'll have a very long list of reasons:

Praise Him for the creation of this wonderful planet.

- ... for His wonderful characteristics and attributes.
- ... for His plan to bless all the families of the earth.
- ... for the life we have received.
- ... for the opportunity we have to be His children.
- ... for His overruling providences in our life.

... for an understanding of His word.

... for the opportunity to be part of the bride of Christ.

May we all in the days or years ahead, always cling to our first love. Let us enthusiastically, by word and deed, render praise to His name.

Closing Hymn: #288 — “The Lord's My Shepherd”

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