

Poetry in the Psalms

Introduction

Definitions of poetry are difficult but features of poetry include rhyme, rhythm and metre, alliteration, assonance, and so on. So while narrative can easily be translated - allowing for cultural differences - poetry mostly doesn't survive translation because of course it relies on the words themselves, rather than their meanings.

The Psalms are complex, but many or most of them seem to have been used in worship - especially in the Temple. The Psalms were not all by King David - Ps 137 (By the rivers of Babylon) is from the time of the Exile (587BC) - but perhaps some of them do date back to David (c1000BC).

There are some set forms - so the Magnificat, though not part of the book of Psalms, is recognisably in a Psalm form - a "triumph" (compare Exodus ch 15 "I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea").

In the Psalms can be found

- Hymns (with responses: Ps 107 "O that men would therefore praise the Lord"; with music: Ps 150)
- Prayers
- Duplicates (Ps 14 and Ps 53)
- Davidic: Psalms 3-41
- Wisdom (Pss [30, 39] 49, 104)
- Pilgrim Songs of Ascents (associated with going to Jerusalem) (Pss 120-134)
- Royal (Pss 2, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110)
- Communal Lament (Pss 44, 60, 74, 79, 80)
- Individual Lament (Pss 6, 22, 38)
- Prophecy (Ps 50)

A neat, accessible, summary is that the Psalms are the hymnbook of the Jews; it is clear that Jesus used them like that, and Christians have followed his example.

Hebrew poetry did not work by rhyme, nor by strict metre; it does have some recognisable features which we can still appreciate as we use the Psalms:

A Acrostic (or something like that!)

An acrostic is a poem where the initial letters of each line make a word. Psalm 119 has 22 sections of 8 verses, and in each section, the first letter of the first word of every verse begins with the same letter of the alphabet - beginning with Aleph, then Beth, and so on....

B Duplication

Ps 62 v 11: Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this

(also eg Proverbs: 6 v 16: There are six things which the Lord hates; seven which are an abomination to him)

C Parallelism

eg Ps 51: Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity // and cleanse me from my sin

For I know my transgression // and my sin is ever before me...

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean // wash me and I shall be whiter than snow

There are other poetic devices (eg imagery) which are also easily grasped; and other poetic devices (eg structure) which require more thorough analysis.