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The Psalms I: Hebrew Theological Poetry

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
for the length of my days.”

PSALM 23:6

“The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express that same delight in God which made David dance. I am not saying that this is so pure or so profound a thing as the love of God. . . . I am comparing it with the merely dutiful “church-going” and laborious “saying our prayers” to which most of us are, thank God not always, but often, reduced. Against that it stands out as something astonishingly robust, virile, and spontaneous; something we may regard with an innocent envy and may hope to be infected by as we read.”

C. S. LEWIS¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Late on in life, and after decades spent praying the Psalmody—morning prayer and evening prayer—from the Book of Common Prayer, Lewis published an entire book on the Psalms of David: *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958). Not necessarily biblical studies, ancient history, or archaeology, Lewis admits that he is no Hebraist—neither scholar or linguist—but presents a personal theological survey in relation to salvation history amongst all peoples (therefore looking at how the Psalms compare with a

1 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 39

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limited revelation even in North European pagan mythology). One of his last books, *Reflections on the Psalms*, reveals considerable maturity.

Hebraists can devote volumes to analysis and understanding the chronology of the Psalms, authorship, the deportation to Babylon, a myriad of approaches. On a multidisciplinary approach to the Psalms, Lewis writes, “In a book of this sort nothing more need, or can, be said about it.”² The framework stands. What he looks at is the theological heart of the Psalms.

2. POETRY: MEANING

Professionally, from the mid-1920s, Lewis earned his daily bread as a teacher of English Literature at Oxford, then as a professor at Cambridge. He was an academic of some distinction, albeit within his primary expertise in literature. He was also fascinated by the big systems of Platonic philosophy, accounts of the nature of things that are astonishingly ambitious in their attempts to encompass the whole of reality in one closed system (which does not necessarily fit well with the Hebrew revelation and relationship with the one true God). Lewis’s major academic contributions focused on the medieval allegorical poets and on sixteenth-century English writers (he wrote on English literature in the sixteenth century for the *Oxford History of English Literature*; published a *Preface to Paradise Lost*; and traced the development of the medieval traditions into Spencer’s *Faerie Queene* in arguably his greatest work, *The Allegory of Love*); in these writers we find, fundamentally, a colossal endeavor to make sense of the world. Allegory is an exercise in linking together endless partial meanings into an encompassing whole. He is therefore a poet and an expert on poetry, his public persona today fails to acknowledge this, to an extent. Therefore, the one foundational love of his life was literature. It was both his passion and his profession. And the literature that he loved was not confined to the texts of medieval and Renaissance Europe, in which he was so deeply read, but included Homer and Sophocles, Virgil and Cicero, the literature of classical Greece and Rome, as well as the Norse sagas and the pre-Christian writings of Old English. On becoming a Christian, he could have abandoned the truth he had found in those works, replacing them with the Bible and the

2 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 2.

teachings of the church. Instead, he looked at the Bible and looked at the pagan sources with fresh literary eyes.

Lewis knew poetry and literature (he was an acknowledged and published poet himself). When reading the Bible, he noted how the Hebrew Bible as literature is taken up to be the medium of something that is more than merely human; so, can we set any limit on the multiplicity of meanings, the gravity of the text, which is laid upon it by God? Lewis acknowledges the work of Bible scholars down the years and the consensus of opinion regarding dating, cultural background, etc. However, in such a work as *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis notes that nothing more need to be said on these issues.³ What Lewis the *literator* focuses on is the structure of the Psalms as poems and a literary theological analysis.

For Lewis, the Psalms are primarily poems—poems that are to be sung. Reading the Psalms as a form of literature does not mean, for Lewis, neutralizing them: removing their theological truth and religious context as worship and discussion with God.⁴ The Psalms inform us about humanity's relationship with God, faith, the unfolding of salvation history, and the myriad of emotions and reasoning that the human can experience.

Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licences and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.⁵

The Psalms do have a unique poetic structure, grammar and syntax; this structure, the pattern, survives translation, the Psalms are relatively unique in this, which has allowed their uniqueness to be translated into dozens—hundreds—of world languages.

Parallelism

What can we learn from Lewis about this structure, what does it tell us about the Psalms, about the Bible, for that matter about the Hebrew

3 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 2.

4 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 2.

5 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 3.

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mindset: rhetoric and humor, grammar and language, vocabulary and technique, device and balance? This is a structure that is then characteristic of the sayings of Jesus, as recorded. Known as rhetorical parallelism, though found in many languages and cultures, it does have a uniquely Hebraic imprint, so to speak, and is used throughout most of the Bible, being richly displayed in Psalms, Proverbs, and the Book of Revelation:

In the way of righteousness is life,
And in its pathway there is no death
Prov 12:28

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want
Ps 23:1

I am the rose of Sharon,
And the lily of the valleys
Song 2:1

He will make your vindication shine
like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the
noonday.

For the LORD knows the way of the
righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall
perish
Ps 1:6.

As the deer pants for the water
brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God
Ps 42:1

He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.
Ps 2:1

Let the evildoer still do evil, and the
filthy still be filthy,
And the righteous still do right, and
the holy still be holy.

The cords of death encompassed me;
the torrents of destruction assailed me
Ps 18:4

Rev 22:11

Lewis was only too familiar with this when, as a Christian convert, he began reading the Psalms on a daily basis. As a device that uses compounds words or phrases with equivalent, though divergent meanings, a clear pattern is created. This is effective when enumerating pairs and series, similar but dissimilar, therefore parallelism is a basic rhetorical grammatical principle.⁶ Parallelisms is, to many, the chief rhetorical device of biblical—essentially Hebrew—poetry.⁷ In the Hebraic

6 See, Connors and Corbett, *Style and Statement*.

7 See, Herbermann, ed. "Parallelism." *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

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tradition, this is often in *tristich* and *distich* parallels.⁸ Robert Lowth (eighteenth-century Anglican bishop, Hebraic scholar, and professor of poetry and grammarian at Oxford University) established the recognition of and study of the poetic structures in the Hebrew scriptures, inventing the term *parallelismus membrorum* to refer to parallelism of poetic lines, which would have influenced Lewis in his own professional capacity at Oxford.⁹

For Lewis this parallelism is not merely for aesthetics, or effect; it is inherent to the meaning. With synonymous parallelism the same idea is repeated twice: cord-death-encompassed/torrents-death-assailed (Ps 18:4), thus the danger, the suffering is stressed, underscored, highlighting the seriousness of what has been survived. Emblematic parallelism sees the first concept compared, or set against the second: compassion links, compares: “As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him”: Father-children/Lord-those who fear. Likewise this comparison may lead, whereby a figure of speech, a trope, in the first line of poetry exemplifies, illuminates, the concept in the second line (Ps 42:1; Prov 11:22). Incomplete parallelism, as Lewis notes in the Psalms, relates closely to emblematic, but this is where the parallelism is incomplete; likewise, formal parallelism is where the subsequent lines simply are usually balanced in length.¹⁰ Antithetic parallelism juxtaposes two lines contrary to each thus creating a contrast (similar to a complementary paradox): “For the LORD knows the way of the righteous/But the way of the ungodly shall perish (Ps 1:6).” This type is parallel in form only; the two (or more) lines don’t contrast, expand, or emphasize. Formal parallelism is merely two lines of poetry, expressing similarity: “Yet I have set My King/On My holy hill of Zion (Ps 2:6).

Lewis notes how in reality parallelism is an example of what all pattern and art involves: “the same in the other.”¹¹ Likewise, Lewis notes that parallelism in the Psalms is intentionally partially concealed for emphasis, but also to add-in multifaceted patterns “crossways,” and in

8 **Tristich:** three lines of poetry, forming a stanza or a complete poem. **Distich,** a couplet as a pair of successive lines of meter in poetry, two successive lines that rhyme and have the same meter: open, run-on, or closed.

9 See, Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrew Nation*.

10 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 3–7.

11 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 4.

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“refrain, as in Psalm 107 and 119.”¹² Lewis wonders whether the parallelism of the Psalms is “a wise provision of God’s, that poetry which was to be turned into all languages should have as its chief formal characteristic one that does not disappear (as mere meter does) in translation.”¹³

If ultimately the authorship of the Psalms lies with *YHWH*’s inspiration then it is of no surprise that the parallelism we see in the Psalms occurs in the saying of Jesus in the Gospels, as they have come down to us.

Parallelism is a central feature of Hebrew poetry. It permeates the words of biblical poets and prophets. The frequency with which parallelism occurs in the utterances of Jesus is surprising, and leads inevitably to the conclusion that the Greek source (or, sources) used by the authors of Matthew, Mark and Luke derive from Hebrew documents.¹⁴

Poetic Structure

Lewis well understood how The Sermon on the Mount is full of Hebraic parallelism redolent of Hebrew poetry, demonstrated essentially in the Beatitudes, but found throughout the sayings of Jesus.¹⁵ This provides emphasis and contrast, stress and repetition, prominence enabling the message/meaning to be driven home. Therefore, asserts Lewis, “Our Lord, soaked in the poetic tradition of His country, delighted to use it. ‘For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.’”¹⁶ Lewis, quoting here Matthew 7:2, adds that the second half makes no necessary addition but echoes with variation: this is important in terms of emphasizing meaning and context, as, notes Lewis also in Matthew 7:7: “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”¹⁷ Different images are used to achieve this: ask, seek, knock, receive, find, be opened. This is rhythmic and incantatory, didactic and memorable. The Word, notes Lewis, that formed and created all in the

12 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 4.

13 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 4.

14 Biven, “Cataloguing the Gospels’ Hebraisms: Part Five (Parallelism).”

15 See, Burney, *The Poetry of Our Lord*; also, Muilenburg, “Hebrew Poetry,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13:671–81. See also, Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth*.

16 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 4.

17 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 4.

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first place, when expressing itself through human speech, speaks using poetry, poetry that Lewis defines as a little incarnation—giving form to that which was not seen or heard.¹⁸

Lewis identifies the same Hebraic poetic structure in the Magnificat,¹⁹ noting how there “is a fierceness, even a touch of Deborah,²⁰ mixed with the sweetness in the Magnificat to which most painted Madonnas do little justice,” corresponding to the frequent severity of the sayings of Jesus, consistent with the grammatical nature of Hebraic parallelism.²¹

Azariah

Rabbi Azariah di Rossi established the linguistic framework for our, and Lewis's, understanding of Hebrew poetry over three hundred years ago.²² Published in 1574, Azariah's *Me'or 'Enayim (Light of the Eyes)* advances and advocates the theory of Hebrew poetry that still holds sway today. Azariah postulate the thesis that

There can be no doubt that the sacred songs possess measures and proportions; these, however, are not dependent upon the number of syllables, whether full or half syllables, according to the system of versification which is now in use among us, . . . but their proportions and measures are by the number of things and their parts, i.e. subject and predicate and their adjuncts in each written phrase and proposition.²³

Thus, as in Lewis's own expertise in poetry, Azariah demonstrates how a phrase that consists of two measures joined with a second set become four (irrespective of syllables) or three measures, six complete measures: always.²⁴ Thus:

18 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 5f.

19 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 6.

20 Deborah (or Debbora), a prophet and judge, heroine of Israel, wife of Lapidoth, who served the ancient Hebrews (Judg 4 & 5), inspired the Israelites to a mighty victory over their Canaanites.

21 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 6.

22 Rabbi Azariah di Rossi was an Italian-Jewish physician and scholar (1511–78); early in life he became exceptionally proficient in Hebrew, Latin, and Italian literature. He studied simultaneously medicine, archaeology, history, Greek and Roman antiquities, Jewish history, also Christian ecclesiastical history.

23 Azariah, *Me'or 'Enayim* (1574) quoted in Burney, *The Poetry of the Lord*, 69.

24 Azariah quoted in Burney, *The Poetry of the Lord*, 69.

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“Thy right-hand / O-LORD” “is-glorious / in-strength”
1st measure/2nd measure 1st measure/2nd measure

Exod 15:16

Unlike poetic systems in other languages and traditions, the number of words or syllables (half or full) is unimportant: balance is, especially balance of ideas.

Revd C. F. Burney noted in his seminal 1925 study of Hebraic poetry forms in the Hebrew Bible that

Considerable portions of our Lord’s recorded sayings and discourses are cast in the characteristic forms of Hebrew poetry. . . . [T]he formal characteristics of Hebrew poetry, which, when we meet them in the Old Testament writings, [are] suffice to convince us that the writers are consciously employing poetry and not prose as the medium of their expression.²⁵

This mode of expression in the Hebrew Bible is not scientific as we know the mode of thought today, yet it is in many ways scientific poetry, relating to the medieval Latin/scholastic concept of *scientia*: knowledge reasoning, skill, understanding, even wisdom, objective knowledge—reason, science. Hebraic poetry is used in various forms and types to convey God’s dealings with humanity. This can be said to reach its height in the Psalms.

3. BEAUTY: HARMONY: SWEETNESS

David danced before the ark of the covenant—wildly—rejoicing in gratitude and love for the Lord God, notes Lewis.²⁶ Although Judaism is the worship of the one eternal and true God, it still exhibited elements of worship more associated with ancient pagan religions: excitement, exuberance, but then there is the smell of a sacred slaughterhouse: roast meat, sacrifices (as Lewis terms it). The Psalms were meant to be sung and to be sung with emotion! Later Judaism focused on the synagogue as a meeting house where law was studied: preaching, teaching, listening, but still the Psalms: “The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is

25 Azariah quoted in Burney, *The Poetry of the Lord*, 69.

26 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 38. Referring to 2 Sam 6:14–22.

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to express that same delight in God which made David dance.”²⁷ This is therefore “astonishingly robust, virile, and spontaneous; something we may regard with an innocent envy and may hope to be infected by as we read.”²⁸

This meeting with God is intrinsically related to sacrifice: a sacrificial offering, yes, but also—and perhaps underlined by the concept of sacrifice in the Psalms—personal conversion, giving-up, amendment of ways, honoring God with repentance, reparation, and a change of heart: “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God, are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, O God, will not despise” (Ps 51:16–17). And yet, notes Lewis, somewhere in Hebrew history the unity between prayer repentance with scripture and law study becomes separate from the physical sacrificial offering.²⁹ Yet the Psalms, on numerous occasions, testify to this discontinuity:

Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt-offerings are continually before me.
I will not accept a bull from your house,
or goats from your folds.
For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.
‘If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.
Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?
Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.
Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.’

Ps 50:8–15

Lewis notes, somewhat controversially, perhaps, how the system of animal sacrifice had become an end in itself, a commercial transaction with a covetous and avaricious god, who required large amounts of

27 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 39.

28 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 39–40.

29 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 41–42.

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roasted flesh, dead cattle, sheep and birds for amendment, atonement: for the priesthood this can seem self-serving, maintaining their status as religious professionals.³⁰ And yet, the psalmists and prophets continually speak out, voicing God's self-sufficiency, *YHWH* has no need, of these sacrifices.³¹

The question of animal sacrifice apart, there is a longing in the Hebrew people for this meeting with God, going up to the temple, being in and with the presence, something that moderns can sometimes have little conception of (except where there is a sacramental spirit in some of the churches, though that is so often tolerated, perhaps even dismissed, by those of a particular persuasion). For Lewis, the Psalms speak of the Jews longing for the journey to the temple so they may spend their days contemplating "the fair beauty of the LORD,"³² their longing is like an insatiable thirst to go up to Jerusalem and "appear before the presence of God."³³ and to behold "God's perfect beauty" (Ps 50:2) for their souls are parched (Ps 63:2); The craving they feel can only be satisfied with this presence (Ps 65:4):³⁴

For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.
Ps 84:10 (cf. Ps 27:4; Isa 58:13)

This appetite is the love of God in the Jews. It is full of, for Lewis, cheerful spontaneity, a natural even physical desire.³⁵ This is gladness and rejoicing (Ps 9:2), cites Lewis; musical (Pss 43:4 and 57:9), a cheerful noise (Ps 81:1–2), excited, animated music (Ps 47:1), and loud, with dancing (Ps 150:5).³⁶ However, this does not all bode well. By comparison, Lewis states "There is thus a tragic depth in our worship which Judaism

30 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 42.

31 For example: "obedience is better than sacrifice, and attentiveness is better than the fat of rams" (1 Sam 15:22); and "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but my ears . . ." (Ps 40:6). See also: Ps 69:31; Jer 7:22; Hos 14:2; Mic 6:6.

32 Ps 27:4. See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 44.

33 Ps 42:1–3. See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 44.

34 Ps 27:4. See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 44.

35 Ps 27:4. See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 44.

36 Ps 27:4. See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 44.

lacked”—why?—because so often our worship is founded in the cross—the broken body the shed blood.³⁷ But we still owe an enormous debt of gratitude to this Hebraic poetry, notes Lewis.

Lewis links the joy, desire, and gratitude, the beauty and harmony in the Psalms with not just God’s mercies but also the Law. Lewis finds this bewildering (relating to his skepticism for the Law as a young apostate, and the criticism he exhibited to the, essentially, Mosaic Law in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*).³⁸ Yet, obedience to and thanks for the Law is to be desired: sweeter than honey is the Law, or fine gold (Ps 19:10): “One can well understand this being said of God’s mercies, God’s visitations, His attributes. But what the poet is actually talking about is God’s law, His commands.”³⁹ However, Lewis concedes that the psalmists were referring to the contentment, the serenity, and the satisfaction the Hebrews felt from obedience to the Law. For Lewis, this is the “pleasures of a good conscience.”⁴⁰ There is much digression on the Law and criticism by Lewis, which can appear, given his complaint about the character of the Hebrews and the corruption as he sees it of the Law, to be veiled anti-Semitism: regarding the autonomous nature of the laws as deadly, that this love of the Law leads to pride, a lack of abstract philosophical thinking, the danger of what he terms priggery.⁴¹ Therefore, despite Lewis’s concessions, there is much digression.

4. PRAISE

Lewis somewhat embarrassedly confesses to feeling a puzzlement in the weeks and months after his conversion over praising—particularly the Hebrew emphasis on praise being essential. This should not have been so, he writes, nearly thirty years after the event of his conversion.⁴² Initially he found a mental block when adjured by Christians around him that he must praise God, even demand this in him. (His unspoken response was, it seemed at the time, characterized by more than a touch of Hebraic

37 Ps 27:4. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 45.

38 Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*, chs I.2, I.5, V.5, VIII.7, X.2.

39 See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 47.

40 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 47.

41 See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 50–55.

42 See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, ch. 9.

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humor.) We've seen how Lewis's conversion was protracted, and how there was so much that needed to change in his thinking. He found the Psalms especially troublesome. Apart from trying to put words into God's mouth (Ps 50:20) ordering whales and snowstorms, the sun and the moon, nature, to praise when they could not do otherwise (Ps 104, etc.), it was the number of times he found the multiple uses of phrases like "Praise the LORD" (Pss 22, 33, 102–6, 111–13, 115–17, 135, 146–50), "Praise Him" (Pss 22, 42–43, 69, 107–9, 148, 150) that concerned him. This was a sorry picture of Lewis, a North European pagan, wrestling with the nature of worship that had been trained into Hebrews for millennia. It took Lewis some time through his protracted conversions to arrive at not simply a full acceptance but to see this coming naturally to him.⁴³

Lewis also questioned the motivation of the psalmists: if I do this and praise you, can I have this?—etc. How valid was he to identify a distinction between action and reward, demand and deserve? Eventually with maturity Lewis can see that this is what we the creature has been created for:

God does not only "demand" praise as the supremely beautiful and all-satisfying Object. He does apparently command it as lawgiver. The Jews were told to sacrifice. We are under an obligation to go to church. . . . I did not see that it is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men."⁴⁴

God may love us; but as love, God does not need us, God does not need to love us—but we need God, the God of love, self-giving, self-denying love, *agápē*.

Lewis eventually realized that enjoyment overflows—spontaneously we may say—into natural unaffected, artless praise. Such extemporaneously motivated love for God exudes praise and glory, gratitude and a right religion: "The world rings with praise."⁴⁵

43 See, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, ch. 9, 79.

44 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 79.

45 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 80.