



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 2 Commentary Psalms 1 (1-41)

Lesson 3 Questions Psalms 2 (42-72)

THE MOST QUOTED BOOK OF THE BIBLE The Book of Psalms 1 (1-41)

INTRODUCTION

“Among the Scriptures of the Old Testament that are most frequently used are the ‘Psalms of David.’ In the New Testament, those most frequently read are the Letters of St. Paul, for from these examples sinners also rise to new hope” (St. Thomas Aquinas). For our study’s fifth year, we had already chosen these two sections of the Bible before we came across this wonderful quote from the Church’s most important theologian.

The Psalms speak of the home, the temple, the marketplace, and the palace; they enable us to become sister and brother to our religious ancestors. With them, we are chosen to hear God’s Word in our times and our world. The Psalms show us how these chosen people lived and how we can live this word in our times, for the Psalms reflect both our earthly and our heavenly life. They invite us to find our own individual needs in them. The Holy Spirit’s influence on the Psalms works for us too.

Those whom God calls to a life of prayer use the Psalms more than any source in the Scripture; Jesus Himself quoted more from the Psalms than

from any other Sacred Book. And so does the Church that Jesus founded; for the official prayer of the liturgy uses the Psalms more than any other Old Testament Book. For example, as the church begins its liturgical year with the Eucharistic Sacrifice for the first Sunday of Advent, the entrance antiphon, the responsorial Psalm between the readings, the Gospel antiphon, and the Communion antiphon are all from the Psalms. St. Basil, an early Father of the Church, commented: “The Book of Psalms contains a complete theology.”

Besides the temple or public worship, the Israelites used the Psalms often. They put them to memory and made them personal prayers; they meditated on them often. They considered them a major book or section of their literature, of their faith: “The Law, the Prophets, the Psalms.” Jesus named these divisions in his walk with His two sad disciples after His resurrection:

“Recall that I said while I was still with you; everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and Psalms had to be fulfilled” (Luke 24:25-26).

His own use of them in His teaching was frequent; on the cross He began the 22nd Psalm in a cry of agony that revealed to us His last great suffering: the partial or apparent loss of God's presence: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" (Psalms 22:2).

Christians have made the same use of the Psalms for prayer, meditation, and hymns, as did the Jews. The saints' writings are filled with quotations from the Psalms. Probably the most used book in the Old Testament by Christians has been the Psalms.

I. THE PSALMS OF ISRAEL

A. Origin. The Psalms are based on the Israelites' unique view of history as the dramatic narrative of God's deeds among men. In the Book of Psalms, we have a microcosm of the whole Old Testament. This was a definite breakthrough in the field of world religions—the first discovery of history as an "epiphany of God" (M. Eliade). For the God of the Hebrews spoke to them and they did not keep quiet; they responded in a personal way in their songs of worship, the Psalms. These Psalms are a condensed account of the whole historic drama from David's time (1,000 B.C.) and even earlier, to late Old Testament times, a span of nearly a thousand years.

Psalm 137, for example, rose from the experience of the Babylonian Captivity which ended in 538 B.C. During that time in exile, the scribes and priests busied themselves with collecting their records, their literature, and their remembered history. After the return from captivity, the hymns and prayers of generations were compiled for use in the restored temple.

B. Division of the Psalms. There are five main divisions of the psalms, called Books, each one ending with a similar blessing. These divisions were set up because the Psalms were collected as they were written—as they came to be expressed in the historical or community events.

The titles we see heading the Psalms, "of David," "of Asaph," etc., do not mean that these were the authors. These are headings added later. Some are confusing as scholars try to figure them out. These headings are not considered inspired, but were retained because of their interesting information on the temple worship of those times. These musicians and creative writers and singers expressed for the community the experiences of important events or contacts with God.

It is believed that the first major collection of Psalms was under the patronage of David, possibly used when no temple existed; some, as you will find, are ascribed to David himself. The "of David" Psalms come to seventy-two. After the usual "Blessing" ending to all the books, Psalm 72 adds, "The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended." The Third Book then begins. Some Psalm titles have different literary or musical direction such as "mizmor," "maskil" and others; some titles give musical instruments needed. The phrase, "to the schoolmaster," is the most frequent of all. "Selah" is a curiosity that scholars believe may mean a pause for a solemn bow or a silence for prayer. It occurs frequently within some Psalms.

Psalms 9 and 10 in our Bible today had once been one Psalm in the earlier Catholic translations. To aid all Christians to share the same Psalm numbers, the church now separates Psalms 9 and 10; an older Catholic copy may have the former numbering; if so, add +1 to the Psalms following Psalm 10.

C. Psalm Categories

1. Hymns. These had a definite form: Introduction, Body, and Conclusion. Many of the hymns were praise songs; they open with a reason for the praise, then develop the event or cause, often in the present tense for Israelites consider their history as part of their own lives. These praise Psalms are in elevated language, rising

from a feeling of exultation. They usually end in blessing formulas, statements of trust and praise.

2. Laments. These pointed out a need, a loss, a complaint, or a situation that could be changed. They often were pleas to God for justice, for His help in a special way. We relate to many of these and they are numerous among the Psalms. They can include a confession of trust, a petition, or a vow of Thanksgiving.

3. Thanksgiving. These Psalms are quite similar to the Hymns which were intended as praise of God for all He had done for them and for what He is in Himself, as so many of our hymns do. Thanksgiving Psalms are often mixed in among the hymns. Also, many thanksgiving psalms refer to an earlier lament whose crisis was ended.

D. Psalms by Subjects

1. There is a group of Psalms we call the Penitential Psalms. The most famous of these is Psalm 51, believed to be David's lament for his sins of murder and adultery in connection with his attraction to Bathsheba. We too, find Psalm 51 a beautiful expression of contrition for any of our sins, for contrition is necessary for forgiveness.

2. Another category is the Pilgrim Songs, called The Ascent Songs, as they were sung going up to the mountain of Zion to the Temple after a pilgrimage to a feast at Jerusalem.

II. EARLIER PSALMS

Some Psalms indicate a pre-Israelite origin in their similarity to the Canaanite hymns: a very old language is used. Poetic images in some Psalms are common in Canaanite hymns which have been found in our times, by archeologists, possibly from the 15th century B.C. For instance, the "sons of God" meant something like a pantheon—many gods of whom one is the most High. One such expression is in Job 1:6: "One day, when the sons of

God came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan also came among them." Psalm 82:1 says: "He judges in the midst of the gods." "All the gods bow down before him." This is very old theology.

A. Psalm 29. This Psalm invites praise from "the sons of God" to the LORD. The idea of there being one god came late, apparently. A word for these beings called "sons of God" was "elim"—a divine being, understood later by the Israelites as "angel" one of the "host of heaven" which made up the Divine Court. (Note the el in "elim" and in "angel"—the ancient word for God.)

In this Psalm the LORD is the "Most High"; it is He that is mighty, the "God of glory." "Give to the Lord glory and praise"—glory in Hebrew is "Kabod"—"heavy." The Lord is of more "weight" than the others. The LORD GOD has massive power; glory here expresses what God is. To "give glory" is to express your understanding of God. "The glory of His NAME"—means the God who masters history and who is to be worshipped, to be given the total submission of your being—Adoration. "Glory" implies worship to one who is the only MOST HIGH.

Later, after Isaias, we learn what it means to be good in His sight; we have morality from Him for He is not only a God of power, but of goodness, of holiness. Psalm 29 is of God's majesty in a storm; the awe felt in the powers of the wind and the rains and the thunder brought the line, "and the LORD thundered from heaven: 'Your thunder resounded in the whirlwind!'" Ugaritic Psalms have been found similar to this in the earlier days of Canaan. "The LORD sits above the water—he is enthroned forever." Psalms akin to Psalm 29 describe the Israelite's God, the God of power and strength, expressed in the word "glory."

B. Psalm 104. Another beautiful Psalm from earlier times, perhaps borrowed from Canaanites, is Psalm 104. This Psalm exults in the glowing

descriptions of God—a poet is speaking, writing. “Bless the Lord, O my soul!”

What is the meaning of our use from these early times of “bless”? Blessing is an independent, personal power. The Hebrews recognized it in their God, who is the highest of greatness, who is “robed in light.” “Light,” the Psalm indicates, was before the sunlight (created on the fourth day). The light of God here is recognized as transcendent over anything He created. This writer is an advanced believer; his God has all personal power.

III. THE TEMPLE LITURGIES

Our word “Liturgies” comes from the Greeks who called their worship “liturgoi”—the work of the people in the public worship of their gods. Even the slaves were expected and freed from work, for the liturgy was the people’s response to their gods, upon whom, they thought, their lives depended. Greek liturgies were planned and executed by leading citizens. The great Greek dramas were written and staged when it was a playwright’s turn, or when a citizen paid him, as an offering to their gods and their citizens.

For the Israelites this response, their liturgy, was a response of the Covenant community to the will and revelation of Yahweh, their God, the one true God of whom they alone were to spread the knowledge to mankind, especially through the Person of the Man-God, their unique contribution to the world, whom one day they too will acknowledge.

Jewish worship, like that of other agricultural people in the area, was the sacrifice offered of a possession of great value to them—a living animal, the best of their flock. What is the best of your “flock” to give to God? Also, an important part of their worship was three categories of prayer: hymns, laments, and thanksgiving—the Psalms.

It is generally accepted that David, when king, called the Levites to plan true worship of God, especially for the planned temple. The Levites were descendants of the patriarch Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Chapters 23-25 of 1 Chronicles describe David’s organizing of the Levites and priests, who were also of Levi’s descendants, through Aaron. Through David and the Levites, the Psalms became part of Temple worship.

IV. A PRAYERFUL LOOK AT THE PSALMS

A. Psalm 63. This Sunday morning Psalm from the Divine Office is a favorite. It has been said or sung on Sundays by hundreds of people for hundreds of years.

O God, you are my God, for you I long;
for you, my soul is thirsting.
My body pines for you
like a dry, weary land without water.
So I gaze on you in the sanctuary
to see your strength and your Glory.

For your love is better than life,
my lips will speak your praise.
So I will bless you all my life,
In your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul shall be filled as with a banquet,
My mouth shall praise you with joy.

“For you I long... for you my soul is thirsting,” reminds us of Jesus telling the woman at the well about the living water that He can give. What amazing words! The Psalmist finds his soul thirsting “for you, my God.” Which of us can say that? He can make us feel this thirst, for He abides within us; if we know Him there, we are truly “blessed.” Such a Psalm, we know, is inspired by God—is the result of an inner grace. Even reading it can inspire in us a need for God.

B. Psalm 23. A Psalm of David, the king taken from caring for his flock of sheep by God Himself. Such a Good Shepherd Psalm comes from his love and experience.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,
 in verdant pastures he gives me repose;
 Beside restful waters He leads me;
 He refreshes my soul.
 He guides me in right paths for his name's sake.
 Even though I walk in the dark valley
 I fear no evil; for you are at my side
 With your rod and your staff that give me courage.

You spread the table before me
 in the sight of my foes;
 You anoint my head with oil,
 my cup overflows.
 Only goodness and kindness follow me
 all the days of my life.
 And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 for years to come.

C. Psalm 59. The St. Louis Jesuits put this Psalm to music, using a different translation than the American Bible.

YOU ARE NEAR

Yahweh, I know you are near,
 Standing always by my side.
 You guard me from the foe,
 and you lead me in ways everlasting.

1. Lord, you have searched my heart,
 and you know when I sit and when I stand,

Your hand is ever upon me,
 protecting me from harm.

2. Where can I run from your love?
 If I climb to the heavens you are there;
 If I fly to the sunrise or beyond the sea,
 Still I'd find you there.

The Psalmist talks directly to God; full of grateful trust that God is always aware of where we are, what we need. The surety of being loved by God is clear. God must rejoice to hear us pray such a Psalm, with its trust and awareness of His care.

D. Psalm 117. This is the shortest of the Psalms, but its four lines speak to "all nations" and "all peoples" and ends with an assurance that the Lord's faithfulness endures "forever."

APPLICATION

We will do well to memorize the Psalms that speak best to us, at least the verses that help us to pray, to remember God through our days. The early monks, men (and women) who fled the dissolute, dying Roman empire learned the 150 Psalms and other passages. There were not many handwritten Bibles, perhaps one in their reading room which they chained for fear of being stolen. Do we appreciate and use our Bible daily?

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 3
Psalms 2 (42-72)

Day 1 Read the Notes.

- a. What personal help did you receive from the notes or the questions?

- b. From the Psalms you read for Lesson 1 did you receive any light for your life?

Day 2 Read Psalms 18, 30, 40.

- a. List some verses that you especially liked in Psalm 18 and explain why.

- b. List the verbs in Psalm 30 which the Psalmist did or will do regarding God.

- c. Which of these do you plan to do regarding God?

- d. Psalm 40 is a Messianic Psalm. Read it and 1 Samuel 15:22, and Hebrews 10:5-7. What verses describe Jesus as our Savior, our Messiah? Read aloud one or two.

Day 3 Read Psalm 44, Romans 8:35-39.

- a. How does this Psalm help us suffer for God, though innocently?

- b. Who is the “hero” in Psalm 45?

- c. How has Catholic tradition seen this “daughter” in verse 11ff? (See footnote.)

- d. Read Psalm 47, footnote to verse 10 (if your Bible has a footnote), and Deuteronomy 32:8-9. What have you learned here?

- e. Read Psalm 49. What does it say to America?

Day 4 Read Psalm 51, the most famous and most used by Christians after sinning.

- a. Write some expressions of contrition.

- b. Write down some words that show “trust in God’s love.”

- c. What basic Christian doctrine does Psalm 51:7 foreshadow? Read Romans 5:12-15, 18-19.

Day 5 Read Psalm 78:1-22.

- a. What does the Psalmist advise for each generation?

- b. Read Psalm 105. What spirit does this Psalm show in the Chosen People?

- c. What does it say of God?

Day 6 Read Psalm 25. This is an alphabetic poem (an acrostic), for the lines begin with successive letters of the alphabet: aleph, for example, is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and taw, the last letter of 22 letters.

- a. What attitude is meant in verse 12 and verse 14 by “fear of the Lord”?

- b. Read Psalm 27. “Hear O Lord the sound of my call” (verse 7) was set to music by a modern Jesuit musician and is in the often-used GLORY AND PRAISE song book. Quote 2 verses or phrases that speak to your heart.

- c. Read Psalm 110. In verse 4, how is Christ like Melchizedek, the king who welcomed Abraham in Genesis 14:18 and Hebrews 7?

- d. Read Psalms 149 and 150. What do these last Psalms tell us of temple worship?