Psalms: Responses to Questions

# Psalms of Praise

*Why did the Psalmist use the forms and language of Middle Eastern poets to describe God. Doesn’t this make Israel’s faith not unique?*

\*\*The content can be unique even if the form is the same. Christian poetry and singing follows secular forms but the content is different.

*Were the praise psalms written for public use or just as private expressions of devotion? And when were they written? What is the relationship between 95 and 100? Why are both included in scriptures—aren’t they redundant to a certain extent?*

\*\*We don’t know about the “when.” They look like praises written for public use, don’t they? The two psalms both follow the same form because the form does the basic things that need to be done—exhort and give the reasons. There’s no implication that they need to have been written by the same person. Of course Psalm 95 has the extra element at the end, so that it could be used in a different context. So 100 could have been omitted because it is redundant; but the Bible doesn’t worry about redundancy (have you ever compared Matthew, Mark, and Luke?).

*When the psalmist says “shout,” was it an actual loud vocalization or was he alluding to something different?*

It’s the same word as the Israelites’ shout at Jericho (Josh 6) or after David kills Goliath (1 Sam 27:52)—or when the work on the temple is begun in Ezra 3….

*Some questions and comments on the last part of 95:*

1. *In 95, what are we to make of the fact that the Psalmist speaks for God in Vs. 7b-11? Why does it change voice and style? Is this a common occurrence in the Psalms? I would expect a psalm to end with a good promise for those who are faithful, but it ends with a disappointing end to the unfaithful.*
2. *Does the change in voice point towards a form of liturgy where there is praise followed by an exhortation or recitation of the exodus story? Does this lead change indicate multiple authors or modifications over time? No matter of how it came to be this way, it is edifying, I’m just interested in the communal aspect of the writing and communication of scripture.*
3. *While Psalm 100 praises God in a spirit of absolute thanksgiving, Psalm 95 calls us to worship and obey with a fearsome warning. How does the difference in motivation change the nature of the praise itself? I can't help but think that God would rather be praised and obeyed because of who he is (for his goodness, faithfulness, love, power, and glory) rather than because we feel afraid or threatened by what might happen to us if we disobey. The former motivation seems purer than the latter. Because both kinds of appeals are included in the Psalms, it is implied that God means to communicate the necessity of praise in both or more ways.*

\*\*It looks as if here a worship leader addresses the congregation with God’s response to their worship. It’s usually assumed that it was written that way, and it might then have led into an account of the exodus, and even more of the demands God then made at Sinai, though I like the idea that 1-7a existed on their own first and then one time God responded with 7b-11. There are one or two other examples of a change of voice like this (e.g., 81), though not a huge number. I’m sure the people expected a psalm to end on a positive note—that’s why it doesn’t! The warning isn’t a motivation for the worship (the worship comes first, the confrontation second). It’s more like one of the challenges in the Prophets about the way life must match worship. Hebrews 3 says “the Holy Spirit” speaks these verses.

*In 95:10-11, when God is speaking about the generation that he loathes, is he making a reference to the people of the exodus? What does the phrase "enter my rest" refer to? I associate “loathing” as being very close to hatred. Is this hyperbole? How ought one to interpret this hatred from God towards an entire generation?*

\*\*Yes—the exodus generation were not allowed to enter the promised land, which is what the “rest” refers to (it is the land where Yahweh settles down). You can read about Meribah and Massah in Exodus and Numbers. So the later worshipers need to be wary that they do not lose their place there by the same disobedience. Loathing isn’t a very common word in scripture, but the use of the word “hate” indicates that it is at least as much an action as a feeling—it means repudiate. God does repudiate this generation in not letting them enter the land. There were one or two exceptions such as Joshua himself.

*In 100, translations have “all the earth,” but kol h’ arets could also mean “all the land.” In light of Israel’s focus on their nation’s relationship with the Yahweh and the rest of the psalm that seems to talk about God’s people as the audience (v. 3), would a better rendering of be, “Make a joyful noise, all the land (of Israel)”If 100 really is directed towards the nations, what would be the role that this played in Israel’s worship? How would the singing of this “hymn” affect the way they viewed their role in helping the nations to do so?*

\*\*I guess the translations are going by the fact that in 96—99 (for instance)the context makes clear that *ha’arets* means “the earth.” That’s so when the focus is on what Yahweh has done for Israel—that’s assumed to be relevant to all the world. I don’t think Yahweh ever told Israel that they had to go and help the nations come to serve him—it was his job to bring that about. This exhortation is more like the exhortation to the planets, mountains, trees, animals, and so on in Psalm 149. To give this exhortation to the nations that they should acknowledge Yahweh, is a way of actually glorying Yahweh.

*In 100:3, what is the significance of the word “know”? It stands out among the other terms referring to worship. Is the passage asserting that we can worship God by acknowledging Yahweh as the only god?*

\*\*”Know” often implies “acknowledge.” So yes, acknowledging that Yahweh is God is an aspect of worship.

*In 100:4, why does the psalmist link the “gates” with “thanksgiving” and the “courtyards of God” with “praise”? And what are the gates and the courtyards?*

\*\*It’s a great example of how parallelism often works by splitting expressions between the cola—that is, in prose you would say “Come through his gates into his courtyards with grateful praise.” The courtyards are the open space that dominates the temple area (they are Yahweh’s yard, where he invites people for BBQ and celebration). The gates are the entrances to that area.

# Psalms of Protest

*I have heard it said that prayer doesn’t change God and is more about the human journey then it is about God. Prayer is about our journey because God does not change and therefore shouldn’t our prayers be focused on God’s unchanging greatness verse our human inadequacies? What is the end goal of lament? Is it simply to be honest before the Lord? Is it a step in strengthening our relationship with Him?*

\*\*I don’t know where the idea comes from that prayer is designed to change us, but the Psalms and elsewhere in OT and NT surely give the impression that prayer is at least as much about changing God—not changing God’s character, but changing the way God is acting. I am scared by that verse in James, “You don’t have because you don’t ask.” The end goal of lament is to get God to act differently.

*The Psalms often seem to bargain with God or try to bribe God—“Rescue me and I will come back to praise you.” Is that okay?*

\*\*Yes, they are unscrupulous in the way they seek to get God to answer, like children with a mother or father. And apparently it’s okay with God, as he put these psalms in his book. Of course when we pray “for your glory’s sake” and the like, we are doing the same.

*We are often told that we have to stop being individualistic but psalms such as 22 and 88 seem individualistic. Is there a difference between protest psalms and praise psalms?*

\*\*Yes, it would be unbalanced the other way if we moved from being totally individualistic to being totally corporate. To put it another way, being individual is okay; being individualistic means having no room for the corporate. Praise psalms don’t refer to “me” because they focus on God, though thanksgiving psalms can be either “I” or”we.”

*How am I to understand the NT teaching of being joyful always (1 Thess 5:16) and rejoicing no matter what situation (Phil 4:4) or even not complaining or arguing like this “crooked and depraved generation” (Phil 2:14-15) to not worrying (Matt 6:25-32) with the promotion of lamenting in worship and in my Christian walk? I try to connect it but… it seems to be both... kind of confusing to me. How do we balance laments with "thy will be done?"*

\*\*One answer might be, if you can’t obey the instruction to be joyful or not to worry, are you not able to talk to God about how things really are? The context of “thy will be done” might help—in Gethsemane Jesus laments, then submits; then on the cross he laments again.

*Were the protest psalms sung, as praise psalms were?*

\*\*There are what seem to be references to tunes, so I guess the answer is yes. The singing would be more like chanting or rap (or the blues).

*When I complain to God how do I know I’m still being respectful? Are there examples of wrong ways to cry out to God in anger? In Job it looks as if Job is “scolded” for questioning God. Is there a balance? Are we allowed to question or are we supposed to revere God and just accept that he has everything under control?*

 \*\*The psalms suggest we needn’t worry about the question of being respectful. We are like children battering on our mother’s chest. The major occasions when Israel gets in trouble with God for their anger are when they don’t express it to God but instead direct it against Moses (see Exodus, Numbers). God’s rebuke of Job concerns his thinking he is the center of the world in his challenges to God; God later declares that Job has been speaking the truth about him.

*How did the psalms come to be in the form that they are?  Why didn’t the writers also give us a behind the scenes commentary with the Psalter?*

\*\*Yes! We would have loved that! But they knew that the point was the psalm itself. The point lies in the way you use it. How they came to write it is irrelevant.

*What indication do we have to God’s responses to the psalms in general?*

\*\*The psalms of thanksgiving are ones where people come to thank God for responding and acting. Other parts of the OT give similar examples (e.g., Hannah, Hezekiah). Elsewhere God says “No!” (e.g., Jeremiah, Job).

*22 Was such psalm written for worship or just for reading?*

\*\*I imagine all the psalms were written for use in worship, so this is a prayer for praying.

*22 Introduction.* What does the title “the deer of the dawn” mean?

\*\*It may be a tune.

*22:1. Why do we feel like we cannot be honest with God like this in the church? What makes humans feel so abandoned even after we know Him personally, what makes us feel like we cannot be this honest in prayer?*

\*\*What makes humans feel abandoned may be that we actually are abandoned. By being abandoned the psalm means God does nothing to rescue us, and sometimes God acts that way, as happened to Jesus when he uttered this prayer. The OT doesn’t give examples of Israelites praying like this in regular worship, so maybe they had the same problem as we had with church. See Hannah’s story (1 Sam 1). If they did, I suspect it was in the company of friends and family. So I would say, form a group of people who covenant with each other to be with one another in praying this way when they need to.

*22. It is troubling that the psalmist experiences silence. Clearly in this Psalm, we see a move from lament to praise, and in the psalmist’s praise, we sense the presence of God. But in the times where he doesn’t experience deliverance, where we don’t experience the response we know God is capable of giving, and has given in the past, we are left with questions. In this psalm, the answer to that question is given in verse 29 –‘all the rich of the earth will feast and worship / all those who go down to the dust will kneel before him –those who cannot keep themselves alive.’ This contrast is troubling to me, although it does point that the end result for both is communion with God. This is the goal –our lives, whether in sickness or in health –are about the praise and honor of God. So, the next question it leaves me with is how can we effectively comfort those who experience silence in their lives? How do we show empathy in a way is effective? How do we communicate God's goodness in a way that isn't delivered as a pat answer? God's answers to each of us are different, as in verse 29 -some will experience great riches on earth, and others will struggle to keep themselves alive.*

\*\*Wouldn’t it be more troubling if the psalms did not presuppose the same silence as we sometimes do? The fact that they do suggests that the way we comfort people about God’s silence is to help them pray the way the psalms do—maybe not a psalm with an answer, if they have no answer.

*22:3-5. What emotions must go through the writer when in the same breath, almost, he feels forsaken and, still see God being great and loving? How can I have that kind of mature faith? How does one embark on that kind of spiritual formation?*

\*\*One of the things that some psalms model is a kind of commitment of the will or the mind not to let the present suffering make one forget the other facts about reality, the facts about God. To put it another way, it’s to express emotion but not let that be the only reality. (Psalm 89 is different because there the psalmist feels free to move on from praise to accusation and never move back.)

*22:6. When the Psalmist says that he is not human but a worm, is he dehumanizing himself because of a belief that he does not deserve nor will receive what God has given other humans. It seems as if he drops the expectation for his relationship with God so as not to be disappointed.*

\*\*I think “worm” maybe has different connotations for us. A worm is something can’t do anything (cf. Isa 41:13-16). He doesn’t seem hesitant about expressing hopes from God in the psalm.

*22:16. Is there a verdict on “pierced” versus “lion”?*

Yes: it should say “shriveled” (NRSV) !!!!! The Hebrew text certainly has “like a lion, but the line then lacks a verb. While Christians came to interpret the word to mean “pierced,” this involves stretching the meaning—the verb in question means “dig.” It may have led Jewish copyists to “correct” the text because it played into Christian hands—or Christians may have ‘corrected” the text to underline the psalm’s applicability to Jesus. There is better evidence for a verb meaning “wither” not “dug/pierced.”

*22:21. I wonder how the psalm would have read like if it ended here. I think sometimes that how we do feel, and maybe we don’t ever get to verse 22.*

\*\*Yes—that is how other psalms end (e.g., 88; 89).

*22:12-13. How does the imagery of bulls, dogs, lions and wild oxen play in describing the enemies around the psalmist? What is Bashan?*

My guess is that it refers to human enemies, but the use of metaphor means a person praying could use it to refer to whatever was attacking him. Bashan is the Golan Heights—great pasturage, and therefore big cattle!

*22:22-31. Some questions about the last part.*

1. *There is a puzzling subject switch here from referring to the suffering of the Messiah to a praise song. Is this supposed to be Jesus telling everyone to praise God for being our deliverer? Furthermore, how is it that David is so detailed about the afflictions of Christ? Is this David prophesying about the coming of Christ, and if so, did David know Christ in a much deeper way than we think if He foresaw His coming so vividly?*
2. *I wonder how the psalmist can be so confident? At times it almost seems like “self-talk” - the very thing that non-believers mock. We talk ourselves into thinking that God will take care of us. What would be our response to a doubter?*
3. *Is this psalm saying that God will rescue people out of every dire situation if they ask? What does it say about unfortunate circumstances coming when there is no apparent sin? Is this the same message as Job, if only implicit?*

\*\*The psalm isn’t expressed as a prophecy but as a prayer, and before Jesus that’s how it would be used. So when Jesus quoted it, he wasn’t saying, “This is a prophecy I am now fulfilling.” He was saying, “I am going through something terrible, so I am going to pray the same way as this psalm does.” The Gospels then follow him in looking at his experience in light of the psalm, and apply it to him—in a sense it thus becomes a prophecy, but it started off life as a prayer. Once you read it that way, then indeed we can apply the last part of the psalm to what happens as a result of his resurrection—see Hebrews 2:12. In origin, when Israelites who had been abandoned by God used it, the last part would be their response of trust and praise and hope to the fact that God had heard their prayer and their deliverance would come(in other words, they know God has heard their prayer and made a commitment to restoring them, but they haven’t seen the restoration yet). I would shrug my shoulders about the doubter until the time came when God did restore me, then I can point out that God has acted! No, the psalm isn’t making a promise of what God will always do; it’s testifying to what God did for someone. It invites you into envisaging a possibility, not into certainty.

*88. What theological implications does this psalm for theodicy? What are the theological implications of blaming God for suffering? Why would psalms such as this one be included in the canon, even though they challenge many common assumptions about God’s nature?*

\*\*It excludes standard solutions to theodicy such as the freewill defense and the idea of blaming Satan. It takes God as really sovereign in the world and thus as responsible for what happens in the world. It makes prayer possible. It sees the challenge of theodicy to God as lying in whether God will respond to the prayer and act. Then the psalmist will stop fretting. And it’s in the canon because there were enough people who said “Yes, that’s just how things are, and we need to say so to God.” So whereas many people find 88 depressing, people who go through this experience may find it encouraging: it means they are not alone and they can talk to God about how things actually are.

*88 Introduction. Why is this called a Psalm of the Qorahites? Who were they and what happened to them to create such despondency?*

\*\*The Qorahites were one of the Levitical music groups (2 Chron 20:19). Their reason for composing the psalm won’t be their problems but to provide a prayer for people who need to pray this way.

*88:1. The psalm talks about prayer day and night. Is there a pattern of prayer here?*

\*\*There were offerings in the temple at daybreak and sunset, and it looks as if these were also regular times of prayer—people could pray knowing that the sacrifices were being offered (which was probably far away). But in this psalm, day and night may just mean “continually.”

*88:2. The only real request made of God is that the prayer is heard. Does this signify a faith that in hearing, God will certainly relieve the petitioner from his situation? In Psalm 89, too, there is no request made of God to remedy the situation in a specific way. Does this signify a greater level of faith, understanding or respect for God than we tend to have?*

Yes: the focus in the Psalms is often just to get God to listen. Everything else will then follow. God can be trusted to work out what to do.

*88:7. “Wrath.” Must the subject of God’s wrath “do” something to invoke it, or is God understood to pour out wrath simply because it’s Gods prerogative?* How are we supposed to proceed if and when the wrath of God is “unwarranted?”

\*\*The experience of wrath in the OT is the experience of calamity, the kind of thing that would suggest someone is angry with you. It doesn’t establish whether you have deserved it, as this psalm and many others indicate. The situation is simply that terrible things have happened. Then the Psalms with their strong belief in God’s power and sovereignty attribute the bad things that happen to God, which means you can ask God to do something about it, especially if it unwarranted.

*88:11. What is Abaddon and why is there no declaring of God’s love and faithfulness there?*

\*\*It’s another word for the place where dead people are, like Sheol—see the parallelism through vv. 11-12. (See w.). There’s no declaring of God’s love and faithfulness there because the people are dead so they can’t do any declaring and because God isn’t acting in love and faithfulness there so there is nothing to proclaim.

88.18. What are we to learn in circumstances like this psalm where it feels like we pray with no response from God? Is this the only psalm *that does not include a direct step to praise? If so, how do we make sense of this being the exception? The close does not look like a closing. It is possible what we have is only part of it?*

\*\*We learn that we need to come back and pray again tomorrow? Maybe we make sense of its uniqueness on the basis of its reflecting the extremity of human experience. Not many people have this experience, but some do. There’s no way of knowing whether we have only part of it, but the effect of its being in the Psalter in the form that it has is to reflect the fact that there is no closure for the person who has to pray this way.

*89 Introduction. Who is Ethan the Ezrahite?*

\*\*Presumably a worship leader. In 1 Chron 15:19 an Ethan is a singer and percussion player.

*89:6-8. Was it a commonly held view that God was simply supreme among many gods?*

It’s the regular OT perspective. Maybe it helps us to think of these gods as more like what we would call principalities and powers. The gods aren’t eternal and they are created and can die.

*89:10. Rahab the sea monster intrigues me!*

\*\*It’s the same as Leviathan (not the same as Rahab in Joshua, which is spelled differently)—an embodiment of tumultuous power asserted against God, the OT equivalent to Satan.

*89:22. What is this vision? I am wondering about the vision quoted in this passage. Why is the vision sandwiched between praise and asking God to dole out justice?*

\*\*For the vision, see 2 Sam 7/1 Chron 17. The point is that God id not fulfilling the promise expressed in the vision.

*89:38-51. Some questions about the challenges to God.*

1. *How could the authors be so sure to accuse God that it is his fault that some of the trouble has happened, and that God caused it, and not that it is their fault?*
2. *The psalmist says, “You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust” right after he has declared God’s promises to David.  Is he just being melodramatic?  On what basis does he say these things?  I would like to learn more about which parts of Psalms are to be clung to as promises and which are not so.*
3. *Why does Psalm 89 end like it does and not turn back to praise of God in the end?*

\*\*The key question about whether it is okay to challenge God in this way will be whether king and people have been faithful in their basic covenant commitment to Yahweh—the kind of thing that comes in the Ten Commandments. It’s not so difficult to know whether you have been serving other gods, making images, and so on, which is the kind of thing that in other contexts does bring Yahweh’s judgment. If you’re not sure, you can ask (see the story in Joshua 7), or God may tell you (see Isa 42:18-25; 43:22-28). The basis for declaring that Yahweh has not kept his promises is the fact that he has not—king and people have been defeated by attackers. All God’s promises are to be clung to as promises, and when God doesn’t keep them, the psalm models the way we challenge God about the fact and carry on believing that somehow God will. The reason for not ending in praise is that God has not yet answered. So there are some psalms like 22 and some like 89, for using in different situations.

*89:38. Who is the anointed?*

\*\*The current king, the successor of David, who ought thus to experience God’s commitment to David and his line, but is not.

*89:52. It seems there is a pattern to how psalms are ended. Why is this? What is the significance of ending this way and using the phrase “Blessed be the Lord”? And how can we bless God anyway?*

\*\*Actually this isn’t the end of Psalm 89 in particular but the end of Book 3 of the Psalter. So it’s a declaring of Amen and of worship for all of Psalms 73—89. I agree that the idea of blessing God is odd. The verb (*barak*) is related to the word for the knee (*berek*) so maybe it means “Go down on your knees before.” Thus TNIV has “praise.”

*The reference to the rich feasting and worshiping is interesting. Most times, we see the rich denounced in the scriptures. What is meant by verse 29?*

\*\*So even the rich and powerful will acknowledge God!

# Psalms of Thanksgiving

*30 and 118.  I don't see a strong difference between psalm 30 and 118, could you speak to that. It feels like the more praise in a psalm the more similar they are. Were they both written by the same person?*

\*\*Yes, I agree they are similar—though 30 seems to be an individual, 118 the community and the king. We don’t know who wrote any of the psalms. Its their text that counts.

*What does it mean for God to be a “personal God”? Is he personally involved in the everyday workings of our lives, deeply caring about every matter? Or is this a Christian (human, American, etc) formation out of a need for comfort? Or is that God is particularly and specially drawn to those experiencing deep pain or sorrow? I ask because of growing up in a church that described God as personally caring about everything-- so you should even pray for a parking spot.*

\*\*I think you are right that these psalms focus on God’s action in relation to calamities and threats (though the talk of deep pain and sorrow is also a modern Western focus, on feelings). So it’s easy for us to trivialize the idea of God being involved with us personally. Yet the OT gives a basis for saying that God is involved in every aspect of our lives (e.g., Ps 104, and Proverbs). I personally don’t often pray for a parking place, but I give thanks when I find one in a tricky situation.

*30 Introduction. It says it is a song from the dedication of the temple, yet there is no mention of the temple.*

\*\*The difference suggests that an individual thanksgiving psalm was re-used for the dedication of the temple after the exile (Ezra 6) or the rededication after the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167BC (dedication is *Hanukkah* and Hanukkah does celebrate this rededication).

*30:9. Why does the speaker still seem to question the reason for his suffering? And is there a difference between Sheol and the Pit?*

\*\*What he is doing throughout is telling the story of what happened, and he does it twice in vv. 1-5 and 6-12. So he’s not talking about his questions now but about the questions he was asking before. Sheol and the Pit are the same.

*30:12. Why* does the NRSV change “glory” to “soul”?

\*\*There are quite a few passages where it makes more sense to assume that *kabod* has this meaning (more literally, “liver’).

*118. I would like to know why the Psalmist is so confident that God is with him. Both Psalms indicate the deliverance of God, but why is 118 exceptionally proud and confident of God’s involvement?*

\*\*Because he has seen it! He has seen God act! (He’s not proud in a bad sense—he is glorifying God.)

*118. What is the relationship between the victory of the people of God and God’s own conquering? What does Psalm 118 say about the ability of humans to do things “in the name of the Lord” (vv. 10-12)?*

In this psalm, the people’s victory comes about through God bringing out something impossible, doesn’t it? They act in Yahweh’s name—that is, on the basis of who Yahweh is. But in other contexts, Israel wins on its own, or God acts on his own.

*118. In some ways, it seems that God is glorified regardless of his people’s condition and that he resists “fixing” their problems in order for them to reflect his glory in their pain, but the Psalter seems clear at other points that God’s glory resonates through their individual and collective victories.*

\*\*I don’t think the psalms talk about God being glorified “regardless of his people’s condition and that he resists ‘fixing’ their problems in order for them to reflect his glory in their pain,” true thought that is, do they? Their distinctive nature is to challenge God to be glorifies by fixing the people’s problems.

118:1-4. Here and elsewhere in the Psalms “steadfast love” seems to be the main term for describing God’s love. Is there significance behind this?

See # on hesed.

*118:22. The stone in the psalm seems to refer to the king, but this is an image that I associate with Jesus. What is the background for that reference?*

\*\*Any psalm about the king could be applied to the future king once there weren’t any kings—in other words, from the fall of Jerusalem onwards. So in our terms, they came to apply to the Messiah. So the proclamation of Jesus at his entry to Jerusalem naturally picks up this psalm’s words.

*118:14. “Become my salvation”? Was God not already the author’s salvation? Is he speaking about eternity or life on earth? How is this salvation different from the salvation that Jesus bought for us on the cross?*

\*\*In the OT salvation refers to God getting you out of an earthly mess. There is no idea of resurrection. There is a sense in which God was already his salvation, but by actually acting he has turned that from theory to reality.

*118:10. How are we to understand the Psalmist's claim to have cut down the surround nations in the name of the Lord? If the Psalms are primarily calling on God to bring action against the enemies, then this seems to stand in contrast. Here the people bring action against their enemies in Yahweh's name.*

\*\*Yes, you’re right. But the royal psalms (psalms for/on the lips of) the king are the great exception. Presumably this psalm relates to the activity of the pre-exilic Davidic king.

*118:19. Is the gate of righteousness the temple of God in his own heart?*

\*\*Not an OT way of thinking, I would say. It is the gate for the righteous person to enter into the temple.

*118:27b—“Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar”. What does this mean? What is the significance to having horns on the altar?*

The first phrase is maybe a metaphor for the procession extending all around the sanctuary. Horns suggest strength; these horns perhaps point to Yahweh’s strength.

*Why is it that God answers the psalmist, or the psalmist records God’s words to him, in his laments psalms and not in his thanksgiving psalms? Doesn’t God ever give him a response to his praises?*

\*\*Well, a lament asks for and needs an answer.

# Psalms of Confession

*51:1. What is the Hebrew word used in this psalm for “God”?*

\*\*Whenever you get the word “God” (not in capitals), you can be pretty sure it’s *’elohim*. (This psalm comes in the “elohistic psalter,” psalms that mostly avoid the name Yahweh.)

51:4. The psalm introduction refers to David’s sin with Bathsheba and the killing of Uriah. So how can the psalmist state that he sinned only against God? If it was David, then wouldn’t this be more than a sin against only God? What about that "only before you have I sinned" bit? All sins are against God, but is it right to leave out the actual people we have sinned against?

\*\*Right! Though you could say “only against you” if it was serving other gods or relying on other resources, which were regular OT temptations.

*51:5. Does this line imply the idea of original sin? Or is it an example of hyperbole, symbolic of how deeply the psalmist feels the guilt of sin? From a broader perspective, to what extent might this psalm give theological guidance in developing a doctrine of sin?*

\*\*The psalm’s point is that the psalmist has been characterized by sin to the earliest beginnings of his life, which is one aspect of original sin. Another is that Adam’s sin so changed things that it is inevitable that everybody follows is sinful—the psalm doesn’t refer to that idea. Another is the idea that sin is passed down genetically, maybe with the idea that sex is sinful—the psalm doesn’t refer to those ideas.

*51:7. Was hyssop used in ceremonies? Was it a cleansing water that was used (like holy water)?*

\*\*Hyssop itself was a bushy plant that you dipped in water to sprinkle people with. Here the idea is a metaphor.

*51:8. “Let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.” What does this mean?*

\*\*God’s punishment has brought him terrible suffering; he wants his body to be able to join in his praise again (you really need a body to praise God).

*51:10-12. What would the understanding of the Holy Spirit be that the psalmist did not want God to remove it from him? Does losing the holy spirit mean losing salvation?*

\*\*The OT assumes that God’s holy spirit has been dwelling in Israel since the exodus (see Isaiah 63, the other OT passage that uses the actual phrase “holy spirit”), but also comes on certain people from time to time in order to do something spectacular. So the prayer would signify withdrawing God’s dynamic presence from the people and/or from their leader. Note the three parallel phrases here—steadfast spirit, holy spirit, willing spirit. As for the withdrawing of the Holy Spirit, I take it that the fact that the fact that the many churches in Turkey that are referred to in the NT no longer exist indicates that this happened there. But no one who pleads for the Holy Spirit not to be withdrawn is surely going to have it withdrawn—the problem lies with people who turn away (see Hebrews 6).

*51:13. Does teaching transgressors God’s ways of God refer to the nation or to specific people (maybe prisoners or known transgressors)?*

\*\*The whole of vv. 13-15 refers to the fact that when the psalmist has been restored, he will be able to give his testimony to God’s mercy. It’s a standard feature in a prayer psalm to promise to come back to give your testimony.

*51:14. He prays for deliverance from bloodshed. In 2 Samuel 2:13-14, Nathan tells David that he will not die for his sin, but his child to be born will die. So if Psalm 51 was David, then why didn’t the psalmist pray for his child to be delivered from bloodshed instead of the plea of his own life to be spared?*

\*\*Nice question.

*51:15. “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.” This suggests that it is God who initiates and we who respond. I usually think of repentance the other way around; that we initiate repentance and God responds by forgiving. How can I bring these two together?*

\*\*The psalmist is a Calvinist? It can work either way (there are other passages (e.g., in Isa 40—55) that see the initiative as lying with God. But here the idea may be that God has punished and silence the psalmist, so God has to open the lips even if the psalmist is repentant.

*51:16-17. Some questions*

1. *“For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”. It seems a harsh to say that a broken spirit and contrite heart is an acceptable and pleasing offering to God. It makes it sound like God wants us to suffer.*
2. *How revolutionary was this idea that God looks at the heart and not only sacrifice?*
3. *Does this mean that we must be sad, crying in repentance and remind ourselves that we are horrible sinner every time we come to worship?  I mean, how should this properly be understood?*

\*\*Yes, it would be! But the kind of brokenness it is referring to is the brokenness that comes from recognizing sin. And the psalm isn’t talking about “everyday” sin but especially terrible things. There’s nothing revolutionary about the idea that God is interested in motive and thinking as well as action. Sacrifice was never any use if you did not have the right attitude and the right life. But the idea of a metaphorical sacrifice may be an innovative one.

*51:18-19. If Psalm 51 is David and his sin with Bathsheba, then why do these verses come? Further, v. 16 states, “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.”*

\*\*The point is that sacrifice is no good if you are in a state of sin—you need to repent and cast yourself on God’s mercy (as the psalm does). But when God has accepted you and reestablished you, you can resume the regular life of worship. At the moment Jerusalem is devastated, so God must rebuild It? The temple is destroyed and sacrifices are not going on at all.

*Why is the heading there if it’s not true?*

\*\*In light of various aspects of the psalm, it doesn’t seem to fit David very well, which is typical of the long introductions to psalms. The best theory about them is that they are like lectionary notes—they suggest you read the story and the psalm together and see how they throe light on each other. See w.

# Psalm 139

*139 Introduction. What is the title for the Psalm? The NRSV has “The Inescapable God”; the Good News Translation has “God’s Complete Knowledge and Care.” That seems very different and to favor certain elements of the psalms structure. What is the right translation of the title?*

\*\*Neither of those titles are part of the psalm—they are invented by the translators. The psalm’s own title is “The leader’s. David’s. Composition.”

*139:1-6. Does God really know about every action we do and everything that we say? Does he really care about everything we think and say? Hmm. I wonder how if every Israelite had such theology.  Was it common for Israelites to see Yahweh as the creator, who is everywhere present, and who sees our every thing, even our thoughts?  In Solomon’s dedication of the temple, he does seem to recognize how God cannot be contained in a temple.  But how about God knowing their thoughts not just their actions?  Was this somewhat of a revolutionary thought? If people do not believe in predestination, how do they interpret this psalm?*

\*\*I guess they would say it’s wrong! But look again at the words. The psalm begins “You have searched me.” First, the psalmist is talking about himself—he doesn’t say that this is true of everyone. Second, he says that God has looked and discovered—not that God “automatically” knows. I think the psalm acknowledges that God *can* know everything in this way, though it doesn’t mean he always does—hence the way the OT talks about God having surprises. See w. I don’t see that there would be anything revolutionary about these statements about God.

*139:7. “Spirit” has capital “S”. During OT times, was it common that people differentiated God and the Spirit? Was there conceptualization of the Spirit similar to those in the NT?*

\*\*The capital is a piece of interpretation by this particular translation. There are no capitals and small letters in OT Hebrew. Some OT passages semi-distinguish God’s spirit from God, but not as often as the NT does. You can grieve God’s holy spirit (Isa 63:10).

139:8. “If I should descend into Hades, You would be there.” My understanding is that Hades is the separation of God and humanity. Does this verse allude to something different?

\*\*It means that although God doesn’t usually get involved with Hades, God can reach into there if he wants to.

*139:12. How is the darkness is same as the light to God?*

\*\*God can find you in the dark as easily as in the light.

*139:13-15. Do these verses 13 - 14 calls for the pro-life stand unless there are compelling medical reasons for abortion in today's culture? Is it appropriate to use this psalm as a Scriptural basis for asserting when human life begins?*

\*\*I don’t care for the proof text approach to such issues. But the psalm does wonder not only at God’s involvement but at the process itself. It is very ordinary but also extraordinary, as extraordinary as the process whereby God brought the world into being and brought Israel into being. Talking in terms of being embroidered “in earth’s depths” takes up the image of “mother earth” and turns it inside out—it is as if our mother is the earth. The psalm is a piece of poetry and hardly provides a proof text for the conviction that abortion is wrong. Yet its wonder at the process that leads to the birth of a baby and at God’s involvement in that process surely makes it hard to see a decision about abortion as merely a decision about a woman’s body. It involves a decision to terminate a process in which God is involved and one would need impressive reasons to do so.

*139:16. God has a “book with all our days” written in it?*

I take that to mean that the basic shape of our live is largely predetermined—e.g., whether we have a heart that will last us into our nineties or only into our sixties, and whether we have the capacity to be a marathon runner or a great poet. So God can look it up. It doesn’t need to mean that God knows everything about us ahead of time—so as with God’s knowledge of us now, I assume he could do so if he wished.

*139:22. Some questions.*

1. *Was this part of another psalm that was mistakenly added to 139:1- 18?*
2. *“Yes, I hate them-- through and through! They’ve become my enemies too,” coincide with the message in the Bible: love your enemies?*
3. *The psalmist uses such strong language about his enemies—I wonder why such hatred, why does the writer need to prove to God that he hates God’s enemies?*
4. *I’m confused about 19-22.  What is the word for “hate”? Does it have connotations that give us a better picture of what the psalm is talking about? Is there a contrast between the psalmist’s “perfect hatred” and Jesus’ edict to love our enemies?*
5. *How might we use verses 19-22 in prayer today? Is it a prayer for God’s justice against evil?*

\*\*It’s not about not loving his own enemies. These are not people who are troubling the psalmist. It’s about not loving God’s enemies—that is, identifying with them, following them. Hating commonly refer to an action of repudiating and opposing—not just an unloving attitude, a commitment, not a feeling. Thus the NT, too, likes hatred: see e.g., Luke 14:26; Roman 9:13. Hating God’s enemies means having nothing to do with their ways. So perfect hatred means real, true, total hatred. That is what the psalm is concerned for. Augustine commented that we are to love our enemies, not God’s enemies. Maybe he needs to prove that he hates God’s enemies because people are making the opposite accusation, or he just wants to be clear with God about it. So vv. 19-22 fit well in the context of the psalms as a whole, and give us clues about how to read it. In light of knowing that God can know all about us, we declare that we are committed to God’s ways, and we know that if this is not true, God can know and can find us. And the way for us to use vv. 19-22 today is to make a serious commitment to repudiate evil.

139:19. “Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty?” It is saying that God is bloodthirsty?

\*\*No, “bloodthirsty” is plural—it refers to God’s enemies. The bidding is another indication that he is seriously repudiating the ways of the wicked.

*139:23. Is this a self-righteous psalm? In other words is the psalmist basically saying “Lord you know everything and you know that I am not like those evil people. Therefore guide me and smite them down.”*

\*\*Yes, though I wouldn’t call it *self*-righteous. He is assuming that it is important to be able to claim that he is basically living a committed life, in the way T and NT expect.

139:23-24. Is the psalmist saying "but I'm not like those idiots! Look! Search me! I'm just not that dumb!"

\*\*Nice.

*139:24. Can you explain the phrase “lead me in the way everlasting”?*

\*\*That translation perhaps suggests a way that will last me through my life. I think the phrase more likely refers to the ancient way, the old way that God lay in front of his people.

*What causes this to be the second most publicly read/spoken/preached Psalm (after 23)?*

\*\*That it’s very encouraging if you stop at v. 18!