

Metaphors and Justice in the Book of Psalms

Author: Dr. Fred Putnam | Session 4

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Fred Putnam examines the troubling nature of imprecatory Psalms and the pervasive role of metaphor in biblical Hebrew poetry. He argues that prayers for judgment are rooted in God's covenantal justice and character as a righteous judge rather than personal vengeance. Turning to poetic imagery, Dr. Putnam introduces the concept of underlying foundational metaphors—such as 'God is a safe place' and 'life is a journey'—to demonstrate how concrete literary symbols communicate complex spiritual truths. Finally, a detailed textual analysis of Psalm 1 illustrates how Hebrew grammar, structural breaks, and deliberate plant imagery reinforce the theological contrast between the righteous and the wicked.

Outline

I. Introduction and the Problem of Imprecatory Psalms

- A. Christian discomfort with Psalms calling for enemy destruction
 - 1. Church practice and exclusion of Psalms (e.g., Psalm 137 and Psalm 35)
 - 2. Historical interpretations and critiques (e.g., C.S. Lewis's 'sub-Christian' view and theories of ancient sorcery)
- B. Biblical ubiquity of prayers for judgment and retribution
 - 1. Presence throughout Scripture: Jesus (Matthew 7:23), Paul, Revelation 6:10, and the Lord's Prayer
 - 2. Realization that divine judgment is an unavoidable canonical concept
- C. Theological considerations and hermeneutical framework
 - 1. Taking evil seriously: Recognizing certain evil as damnable and worthy of destruction
 - 2. Absence of personal vengeance: Psalmist appeals to God without seeking personal power or vigilante action
 - 3. Covenantal foundation:
 - a. Abrahamic covenant promise: Cursing those who treat Abraham/Israel lightly
 - b. Deuteronomic law (Deuteronomy 19): False witnesses receive the punishment intended for the accused
 - 4. Appeal to God's character as a righteous and unchanging judge

II. Metaphors and Poetic Imagery for God

- A. Physical and geological images in the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 18:2, Psalm 31:2–3)
 - 1. Terminology: Crag, fortress, rock, refuge, shield, horn of salvation, stronghold
 - 2. Clarification: Imagery is non-literal (David was not practicing lithology or rock worship)
- B. Mechanics and function of biblical metaphors
 - 1. Using concrete physical items to grasp abstract concepts (truth, goodness, God)
 - 2. Distinction between surface literary metaphors and foundational metaphors
 - 3. The foundational metaphor: 'God is a safe place'
 - a. Historical and cultural reality: Constant threat of regional invasions (Amalekites, Arabians)
 - b. Topographical context: Judean wilderness crags and steep wadis provided true physical safety
- C. Pastoral application of metaphorical windows
 - 1. Metaphors as limited slots/windows into an infinite divine reality
 - 2. Providing alternative windows (e.g., 'God as a Safe Place' for survivors of human abuse)

III. Foundational Metaphors for Humanity, Life, and Death

- A. Human existence described through nature
 - 1. Foundational metaphor: 'People are plants' (Psalm 90)
 - 2. Synthesis of metaphors: 'Life is a day' combined with 'People are plants'
- B. Metaphorical understanding of death and resurrection
 - 1. Death understood as sleep (John 11, 1 Corinthians 15)
 - 2. Waking up understood as resurrection into a new day
 - 3. Early Christian burial terminology: 'Cemeteries' (dormitories for sleeping soldiers awaiting their general's trumpet) versus pagan 'Necropolis'

IV. Detailed Exegesis and Textual Analysis of Psalm 1

- A. Verse 1: The journey of life and translation corrections
 - 1. Foundational metaphor: 'Life is a journey'
 - 2. Re-evaluating moshav (dwelling/place of living) and yashav (dwelling/settling down) versus 'seat/sit'
 - 3. Progression of counsel, way, and dwelling place
 - 4. Inclusio structure connecting Verse 1 and Verse 6 ('way of the righteous' vs. 'way of the wicked')
- B. Verse 2: Delight and meditation in the Law
 - 1. Grammatical and semantic breaks (discontinuity) between Verses 1 and 2
 - 2. Meaning of hagah (meditate): Muttering, reciting, or speaking under one's breath
- C. Verse 3: The transplanted tree and God as Gardener
 - 1. Meaning of sathul: Deliberately transplanted into prepared, fertile soil
 - 2. Meaning of palgey-mayim: Man-made irrigation canals/ditches ensuring constant water
 - 3. Cultural nuance of evergreen fruit trees remaining vibrant year-round
 - 4. Underlying foundational metaphor: 'God is a gardener'
- D. Verses 3b–6: Contrast with the wicked and grammatical features
 - 1. Grammatical highlight: Unique verb stem/form for 'prosper' at the end of Verse 3

2. Wicked depicted as chaff (valueless plant material driven by wind)
3. Chiasm and unique participle usage in Verse 6 (yodea vs. tovade)

V. Methodological Reflections and the Role of Patience

- A. The necessity of patient reflection in reading biblical poetry
 - B. Practical steps for studying Psalms: Writing out texts, reading aloud, and marking structural/auditory patterns
- C. Closing recitation: W. B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming' as an example of complex poetic imagery