

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Pagan Imagery, Zion, Psalm 100, Session 9, 6-min. Video Overview

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Let's talk about the book of Psalms. For so many of us, it's a source of comfort, a book of praise, and just beautiful poetic prayer. But what if I told you that just beneath the surface of these verses we know so well, there is a hidden battlefield? A sophisticated literary war where ancient poets used the language of their enemies to declare that their god was supreme.

It's fascinating. So let's decode this ancient battlefield together. So this brings up a question that can feel, well, a little uncomfortable.

Did the biblical writers actually borrow from the pagan myths of the cultures around them? And the short answer is, yeah, they did. But the reason why is what's so incredible. This wasn't a lack of originality.

No, this was a deliberate and really powerful strategy. You know, as Old Testament scholar Dr. Bruce Waltke puts it, the psalmists basically co-opted pagan imagery for a very specific purpose. You could almost call it theological combat.

They took the stories, the symbols, all the concepts their audience already knew, and they completely repurposed them to make a pretty radical claim that the God of Israel was infinitely greater than any other god out there. All right, so let's start with a huge one, creation itself. See, in many ancient cultures, creation wasn't this peaceful, orderly thing.

It was a violent, cosmic battle between order and chaos. And chaos was often pictured as these giant monsters. Well, the biblical writers tapped right into that imagery.

I want you to think all the way back to the second verse of Genesis. Before God even speaks, the earth was formless and empty. The original Hebrew for that is *tohu v' bohu*, and it basically means a chaotic, wild, uninhabitable mess.

This is the starting point. This is the primordial chaos that God is about to step into and bring order to. Now, here's where it gets really interesting.

The poets dramatized this whole thing. They gave this chaos names that their audience would have recognized immediately from other myths. Names like Rahab, the sea monster, Leviathan, the great twisting serpent, and Yam, which is the personification of the chaotic sea itself.

By showing God just effortlessly commanding and crushing these forces, the Psalms are making a huge declaration. The God of Israel is the one true victor over all cosmic chaos, period. And this illustrates a much bigger worldview in the Bible.

History itself is seen as this grand movement. It starts with total chaos, all sea, all dark. Then there's our time, the in-between, a mix of sea and land, dark and light.

But it's all heading towards a future with no more chaos, no sea, no dark. So God's creative work wasn't just some one-time event in the past. It's an ongoing project that's leading to his ultimate victory.

Now, this battle of ideas wasn't just happening on some cosmic scale. It was also fought right here on the map. It's a tale of two competing holy mountains.

So in the ancient Canaanite world, the most important holy spot was Mount Zaphon. It was famous as the home of their top God, Baal, and his pretty violent partner, Anat. So what did the psalmists do? They took all the descriptions, all the prestige, everything associated with Zaphon, and they just applied it directly to their holy mountain, Mount Zion, where the temple stood in Jerusalem.

And get this, they weren't subtle about it at all. Look at this verse from Psalm 48. The writer says flat out that Mount Zion is like the heights of Zaphon.

This is a direct shot. It's saying, everything you think is so great about Baal's mountain, all of that truly and much more perfectly belongs to Mount Zion, the home of the one true king. It's so bold.

Okay, so we've seen this strategy play out on a cosmic scale and a geographical one, but how does it actually work inside a single poem? Let's take a really famous psalm and break it down to see how these huge ideas are woven right into its structure. We're going to look at Psalm 100. It's a short but really powerful song of praise.

Now on the surface, it seems like a pretty straightforward song of thanksgiving, but hidden inside its very structure is a powerful argument about who God is. The whole psalm is built on a really simple repeating pattern. The first stanza kicks off with a bunch of commands, what we can call a call to praise: you know, shout, serve, come.

And then right after it gives you the reason for that praise, the cause. Why should we do all this? Because I am God. It is he who made us.

Simple, right? Then the second stanza does the exact same thing. We get another call to praise, enter, give praise, bless his name. And it's immediately followed by the cause.

For I am as good, his unfailing love endures forever. This call-and-cause structure is what drives the whole psalm, but there's something even more clever going on underneath. So all those commands in the psalm, they actually form a cool poetic structure called a chiasm.

Okay, think of it like the ripples from a stone you toss into a pond. The outer ripples match, the next set of ripples match, and you follow them inward until you get to the very center. The point of impact.

And here in Psalm 100, that central, most important point, the bullseye, is the declaration. Know that I am as God. Everything else in the poem radiates out from that one core confession.

So what does all this mean for us today? Chaos monsters, dueling mountains, poetic bullseyes? What's the big takeaway from looking at the psalms in this way? Well, it means

the psalms are so much more than just simple hymns. They are incredibly sophisticated poems. They're like artifacts from a vibrant and often intense conversation that was happening in the ancient world.

The writers knew the culture around them inside and out, and they used its own language to make a bold, counter-cultural argument for their God. And that kind of leaves us with a final thought, doesn't it? Understanding this ancient context doesn't take anything away from these texts. It actually reveals just how deep and dynamic they are.

It shows us writers who weren't afraid to get in the ring with the ideas of their day, to argue for what they believed was true. So the question for us is: how does knowing about this ancient conversation change the way we read these powerful words today?