

Verses 17–18 return to synonymous parallelism (“great kings” and “powerful kings”), and then use synthetic parallelism in verses 19–20 to make the identity of these kings more specific.

¹⁷Give thanks to the one who struck down great kings. . . .

¹⁸And killed powerful kings. . . .

¹⁹Sihon, the Amorite king. . . .

²⁰Og, King of Bashan. . . .

In other cases of synthetic parallelism, lines may build meaning like stacking bricks, one idea on top of another. For example, in Psalm 117:2, the poet calls all people to praise the LORD (line a) because God’s faithful love is strong, and (line b) because the LORD’s faithfulness lasts forever. Synthetic parallelism is the most common relationship of lines in Hebrew poetry, present in every psalm we might explore.

Finally, a third way lines might relate to one another is by opposition: *antithetic parallelism*. So, in Psalm 30:7, the poet writes (line a), “LORD, you made me a strong mountain,” and (line b), “But then you hid your presence”; or Psalm 71:1 (line a), “I’ve taken refuge in you, Lord,” and (line b), “Don’t let me ever be put to shame.” Antithesis may also involve more than two lines, as in Psalm 35:12, “They pay me back evil for good, leaving me stricken with grief,” followed by verse 13, “But when they were sick, I wore clothes for grieving, and I kept a strict fast.”

You may want to explore other types of parallelism that scholars have identified (e.g., introverted or chiasmic), but we must stop here for now. Awareness of these three specific types, and sensitivity to other ways in which one line relates to another, will reward anyone who reads the Psalms.

4. Reading the Psalms as a Book

In the early 1970s, Gerald Wilson began the argument that the Book of Psalms is not just a miscellaneous collection of individual psalms and groups of psalms, but is a carefully crafted collection that presents its own message, beyond that of the individual psalms (see “For Further Reading”). Scholars immediately began to put Wilson’s hypothesis to the test—and now, the general consensus (with a few holdouts) is that Wilson is right. In essence, the Book of Psalms leads its reader on a journey from lament to praise, so the Book has its own message.⁷

Now we take up an abbreviated tour of the highlights.

We have already seen that the Book of Psalms consists of five sub-books, preceded by an introduction (Pss 1–2) that sets out Psalm’s principle themes: the path of the righteous and the wicked—and their fates—and the bad blood between the nations and the LORD’s anointed king in Zion. From this point forward, a story emerges by reading the psalms in order, especially noticing the *seams* at the end and beginning of each of five books. In Book I, the LORD’s anointed one is under pressure due to enemies (see Pss 3–7). In fact, of the thirty-nine chapters in Book I (excluding chapters 1 and

⁷This section is adapted from Glenn Pemberton, *Learning to Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), 126–129.

The Message of the Old Testament

Psalm 78

Like Psalm 136 (see above), Psalm 78 retells the broad sweep of Israel's story from the Exodus and their travel through the wilderness (78:12–16, 23–29, 52–54) and the plagues in Egypt (78:43–51), to conquest (78:55) and rescue after the loss of the ark of the covenant to the Philistines (78:65–66), and then to the selection of a king from Judah (78:67–72). Unlike Psalm 136, however, Psalm 78 recalls the trouble that plagued Israel throughout her history: forgetfulness. The tribe of Ephraim forgot what God had done in the Exodus (78:11–16). Israel forgot about Moses striking the rock so that water gushed out (78:20). All too often, the people would “remember” God was their “rock”—but not sincerely; they only pretended to remember (78:35). And as difficult as it seems, the LORD's people didn't remember what God did in Egypt (78:42). So while the LORD worked among and for his chosen people, they couldn't or wouldn't remember all that the LORD did for them.

The result of forgetfulness is a lack of trust or faith. When the warriors of Ephraim forget all that God did in Egypt, they become cowards in battle and refuse to keep the LORD's covenant (78:9–11). Because Israel sees miracle after miracle but does not keep in mind the LORD's power, they test God over and over again, rebelling and provoking God to anger (78:40–42). The natural result of forgetting what God has done in the past is the failure to remember what God can do in the present. Consequently, Israel does not put their trust in the God who sent the plagues, delivered them from Egypt, took them into the promised land, and put the Philistines to rout. The lack of faith or trust comes from the loss of memory.

This archetype or model of the relationship between memory and trust is the reason Psalm 78 opens with an appeal to tell and retell the “wondrous works God has done” to new generations (78:4). This appeal is a commandment (78:5; cf., Deut 6:4–8), but God does not give commandments just for the sake of making people do something. The reason each generation must tell the stories to the next generation is so that they will have reason to put their hope and trust in God, and not be like their ancestors who forgot and failed to trust (78:5–8). How else will they come to have faith in the LORD?

Psalm 78 reminds us of another aspect of the LORD's character: a lover's passion that evokes the LORD's anger when his people will not remember and trust him. The LORD's steadfast love lasts forever (Ps 136), and a heart that loves forever is impassioned when his people turn away from him to trust others (or themselves). As a result, Israel's failure to remember, which leads to a lack of faith, also leads to a strong reaction from the LORD, who punishes Israel (78:30–33, 58–64) until they come to their senses (78:34) or until the LORD cannot bear to see them suffer anymore (78:37–39, 65–66).

The formula is all too simple: God acts on behalf of his people, God's people are rescued from slavery (whatever type of slavery it may be), and, in time, they forget who saved them. That forgetfulness causes them to have no basis on which to believe or trust in the LORD in the present, so they trust themselves or another god, and the LORD cannot bear the rejection. This is the other side of Psalm 136, the other side of a faithful love that lasts forever.

2) eighteen are laments. Book I ends with a psalm of trust (Ps 41) and words that express confidence in the LORD, despite all of the threats and troubles that have materialized against God's king:

By this I know that you are pleased with me;
because my enemy has not triumphed over me.
But you have upheld me because of my integrity,
and set me in your presence forever. (Ps 41:11–12 NRSV)

Book II begins with lament for some separation or exile from the presence of God (Ps 42–43); and lament continues in Book II even more than Book I, with nineteen laments of the thirty-one total chapters. The final psalm of Book II prays specifically for the king, that he reign with God's justice for the poor and needy (72:1–4, 12–14), and that he live long as a blessing to God's people (72:5–6, 15–17) with enemies bowing before him (72:8–11). Book III not only continues with lament (nine of seventeen psalms), but concludes with a psalm that verifies what we feared: the enemies have finally defeated God's king and the nation has fallen to Babylon (Ps 89). The conflict with the nations that began in Psalm 2 has come to a surprising climax. Despite God's promises to the Davidic dynasty (89:19–37), it has fallen and the nation has been crushed (89:38–45).

Book IV begins with a lament for the brevity of life—or what might be regarded as a funeral song for the death of the nation (Ps 90). But from this point forward, the Book of Psalms turns back toward the LORD with praise—not for a human king or kingdom, but for the LORD's reign over his people. The death of the nation reveals the truth, lost through many years and battles to keep the nation alive: the LORD reigns—always has and always will. Psalms 93–99 declare this news with force (all citations from the NRSV):

The LORD is king, he is robed with majesty (93:1a)

For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods. (95:3)

Say among the nations, "The LORD is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity." (96:10)

The LORD is King! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad! (97:1)

With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD (98:6)

The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! (99:1)

Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob. (99:4)

The recognition of the LORD's reign, with its commitment to judgment and justice (e.g., 90:10–13), changes everything for Israel and the world, even if Israel remains subject to Babylon, Persia, Greece, or Rome. Despite appearances, the LORD reigns.

At the end of Book IV, the psalmist confesses Israel's sins, and prays: "Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations" (Ps 106:47, emphasis mine). In response, the first psalm of Book V urges those set free by the LORD to give thanks (107:1–3). Because of the recognition of Israel's true King and the LORD's intervention to free the captives, Books IV and V lead the reader back to enormous, thundering praise: eleven praises of seventeen psalms in Book IV, twenty praises of forty-four psalms in Book V (thirty-one total praise songs in Books IV and V, while Books I through III only have a total of ten). This enormous swing from lament (Books I–III) to praise (Books IV–V) in the Book of Psalms matches the movement within laments that takes their readers from complaint and request to renewed praise and confidence in the LORD.

This storyline within the Book of Psalms suggests that the book is far more than just a collection of randomly placed psalms. Instead, the editors tell the same story that we have been following throughout this book, from the introduction of sin and Israel's failure to be what God called them to be, to the LORD's refusal to give up on Israel or the world. The LORD still reigns, now and forever, and refuses to give up hope that someday our relationship will be mended.

The Message of the Old Testament

Psalms 104–105

Psalms 104 and 105 are a *psalm pair*—two psalms from one poet, or two psalms the editors deliberately placed side by side.

The opening lines praise the LORD in terms of a great King who emerges in the morning clothed with light (as the sun) and rides on the clouds across the sky, with the wind carrying messages and "fire and flame" (lightning), standing nearby, ready to serve (104:1–4). The next five verses establish the theme: God's mighty work in creation, as God established the earth on strong foundations and brought order to the chaotic waters (104:5–9). But there is more than praise for events in the distant past. Phrases and lines leap from the page: the LORD makes "springs gush forth in the valleys" (104:10 NRSV); the LORD waters the mountains (104:13) and makes grass grow for cattle (104:14a); and plants grow for people to turn into food, wine, oil, and bread (104:14b–15). The LORD "makes darkness," (104:20) so young lions come out looking for the food God gives them (104:21). In fact, everything on earth and in the seas "look to you to give them their food in due time" (104:27).

We may struggle with the claims of Psalm 104. After all, we have science on our side—we can explain how everything works that Psalm 104 claims for the LORD. A spring may be the result of **karst topography** or a confined aquifer. It becomes dark because of the earth's rotation. We don't need God to explain anything in works that Psalm 104—as did those in ancient Israel. So, maybe if this psalmist lived today, he or she might change the psalm, maybe even take it all back. Or not. The LORD did not wind up the earth, pull the string to set it spinning, or light the fuse on the *Big Bang*, and walk away. No—the one responsible for this world continues to support it; and, should the LORD decide to walk away, all creation will collapse. True three thousand years ago and still true today. So the poet hopes the LORD will rejoice in the world—enjoy his ongoing work so that he will stay (104:31). The psalmist vows to worship this God (104:33–34), and wishes those who oppose God's work would be dealt with quickly; they are the one thing that doesn't belong in a world, graciously upheld by God's love (104:35).

Psalm 105 also extends an elaborate call to praise the LORD (105:1–4) and summons for God's people to remember “all his marvelous works” (105:5–7). Specifically, the LORD's people need to *remember* that God *remembers* the covenant made with their ancestors (105:8–10). More specifically, they need to *remember* that the LORD *remembers* the covenant promise to give them the land of Canaan (105:11). There's a lot of *remembering* to do in Psalm 105.

The poet begins the story when the family of Abraham (as well as Isaac and Jacob) was small and an easy target to harass. The LORD would not allow anyone to touch them (105:12–15). The LORD sent Joseph to Egypt ahead of the family so, when famine hit hard, they could safely move to Egypt (105:16–23). The LORD brought a drastic increase in the number of his people, and then turned Pharaoh's heart to fear and hate them (105:24–25). If allowed, Pharaoh would have worked the LORD's people into the dust of Egypt. But the LORD would not allow it, instead sending Moses and plagues so that, by the time they left, Egypt was relieved to see them go, even though they took Egypt's gold and silver with them (105:26–38). Travel through the wilderness was no walk in the park, no food truck to visit every night with water for the next day. But for Israel, the LORD spread a cloud over them during the day, hung a fire in the sky for light at night, and brought quails and rained food from heaven when they asked. The LORD even opened up a rock so that a spring would gush out clean, cool water—like a river in the desert (105:39–41).

Why? Why would God, or any god, be so protective of a small family, think and work for their survival for years ahead of time, make them multiply like—well—rabbits, intervene with fireworks when they are oppressed by Pharaoh, lead them through no-man's land with shade, light, food, water, and . . . ? *Why?* The answer is simple: “Because God remembered his holy promise to Abraham his servant” (105:42). God remembers, and God keeps promises. That's why God gave them the land (105:43–45). When the LORD makes a promise, the LORD keeps the promise—and you (reader of Psalm 105) must *remember* that (105:5).

5. psalms and Other Ancient Near Eastern Hymns

Egypt: Psalm 104 and the Egyptian “Great Hymn to the Aten” (The Sun Disk)

In Chapter Fourteen, we observed how the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope stands behind Proverbs 22:17–24:22. So, it should come as no surprise that we find the same phenomena taking place between Egyptian hymns and the Book of Psalms. One of the strongest examples discovered is the connection between the “Great Hymn to the Aten” (The Sun Disk—see Figure 15.3) and Psalm 104. The “Great Hymn to the Aten” comes from a tomb built by Ay for his wife. Ay was a high official during the reign of Akhenaten and advisor to the next Pharaoh, the famous Tutankhamun. After the young Pharaoh’s death at age eighteen, Ay became Pharaoh (1327–1323 BCE). In Table 15.5 below, you will find selections from the “Great Hymn to the Aten” on the left, with space on the right for you to write all the similarities you can find from Psalm 104.



Figure 15.3. The Aten Disk

“GREAT HYMN TO THE ATEN” ⁸	PSALM 104
Beautifully you appear from the horizon of heaven, O living Aten who initiates life— For you are risen from the eastern horizon and have filled every land with your beauty; For you are fair, great, dazzling and high over every land, And your rays enclose the lands to the limit of all you have made . . .	
When your movements vanish and you set in the western horizon, The land is in darkness, in the manner of death . . .	

⁸Translation by William Nurnane, *Texts from the Amarna Period in Egypt*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World, Series 5 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995): 113–115. I have formatted the lines to fit the available column space.

"GREAT HYMN TO THE ATEN"	PSALM 104
You have granted an inundation [rain] in heaven, that it might come down for them And make torrents upon the mountains, like the Great Green [the Mediterranean Sea], to soak their fields in their locales . . .	
While your rays nurse every field: When you rise, they live and flourish for you. You make the seasons in order to develop all you make . . .	
Every eye observes you in relation to them, for you are Aten of the daytime above the earth . . .	
When you have risen they live, (but) when you set they die. You are lifetime in your (very) limbs, and one lives by means of you.	

Table 15.5. "Great Hymn to the Aten" and Psalm 104

Hopefully, you will have taken the time in class, or in preparation for class, to work carefully through the text of Psalm 104 (which is much younger than the "Great Hymn to the Aten") and are ready to wrestle with key compositional issues:

- How would you describe the relationship between the two hymns? Has Psalm 104 borrowed from or rewritten the "Great Hymn to the Aten"? Or is the relationship looser, only a matter of common ideas in the air of both cultures (but no direct relationship)?
- If Psalm 104 has rewritten or made use of the "Great Hymn to the Aten," what are the key ideas that Psalm 104 has challenged or changed from the Egyptian hymn?

Canaan: Psalm 29 and the Ugaritic Hymns to Baal

Our second example of how the Psalms may interact with the songs of other cultures is somewhat different than the example of Psalm 104 and the "Great Hymn to the Aten." Here, it appears that Psalm 29 may have been a hymn to Baal, now edited to be a hymn to the LORD. In support of this hypothesis are features of Psalm 29 that are similar to poetry from Ugarit and/or ideas in the psalm that sound like worship of Baal. Tremper Longman III identifies five of these commonalities:

- the repetitive nature of the lines
- the geographical locations are in the north, even beyond northern Israel
- the presence of the "divine beings" (29:1) is similar to the divine assembly of Ugaritic literature

- the final picture, “the LORD sits enthroned over the flood” (29:10), sounds like Baal’s defeat of the sea at creation
- the LORD as the power of the storm “evokes a connection with Baal, the Storm god.”⁹

Consequently, Longman points out that many scholars either see an intentional link between Psalm 29 and Ugaritic/Canaanite worship of Baal or they regard Psalm 29 to have originally been a hymn to Baal. In fact, the editing may have been little more than substituting the name Yahweh in place of the name Baal. Try it out and see if you think it works. Read the name Baal where “the LORD” appears in the psalm, e.g., “You divine beings! Give to Baal—give to Baal glory and power! Give to Baal the glory due his name! Bow down to Baal in holy splendor!” (29:1–2, modified). Once you read the psalm with Baal’s name, consider the following questions:

- Does the substitution work? Does the psalm read well with Baal’s name?
- With the substitution in place, do the claims made for Baal match what you learned about the Baal myth in Chapter Seven, page 140?
- Does it seem more likely that the psalmist reworked a prior Baal hymn or merely took claims made for Baal from many different sources to create Psalm 29?
- Finally, what consequence or result comes from what the author/editor of the psalm has done? What do you think the psalm writer was trying to say or accomplish?

Questions of literary dependence or borrowing are difficult to demonstrate three thousand years after the event; for that matter, it is almost impossible to prove anything after so much time has passed. So we look at the evidence and make our best judgment. Most important, whether borrowing or not, Psalm 29 speaks to its time, to people who believe all the claims made for the LORD are supposed to be true for Baal. The writer is daring, brave, and unafraid to challenge the status quo.

Conclusion

If Israel’s world was anything like ours, we could confidently say that her psalms did more to shape her faith and her life than anything else. And maybe it’s true that the power of music transcends culture and time. One hundred and fifty chapters of psalms, a book filled with love songs (the Song of Songs), and another of overwhelming grief (Lamentations), along with other songs scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible (catch Hannah’s solo in 1 Samuel 2, or Deborah’s fiery song in Judges 5, just to get started)—all these tend to make me think that Israel’s music not only shaped her faith more than anything else, but expressed her faith best.

If true, then life with the Lord takes more than the worrisome lyrics and music of the contemporary praise songs that flood our sanctuaries and auditoriums. Life with the Lord, we have come to know through the pages of the Old Testament, calls for praise, but not just praise. The life of faith is not some dance from one *Praise the Lord!* to another *Hallelujah!*—God help us from

⁹Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 155.

spreading such an image of the LORD who saves. Though it is God who saves, but faith-life is not so simple—never has been, never will be. Our faith-walk requires many different languages, many tones, many songs, and many singers. We need the praise songs, and we need the visceral cries of lament that choke back tears to ask, “How long will it last?” (Ps 89:46), or “My God! My God, why have you left me all alone?” (Ps 22:1). And we need the language of reversal, unexpected joy—one of those *you just had to be there* surprises when the Lord changes everything, including our clothes: “You have changed my mourning into dancing. You took off my funeral clothes and dressed me up in joy” (Ps 30:11). So the singers open our mouths to speak the many different languages vital—crucial—for a life-walk with the LORD. Ah, God—may we be people who see and sing the lyrics of those who live all of life with the God who saves.