

Susan Gillingham

›I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre‹ (Psalm 49:4). How
›Lyrical‹ is Hebrew Psalmody?
(Abstract)

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This paper discusses biblical poetry in relation to the ancient Greek-Latin tradition of lyric poetry. Since the Greek word »lyric« and the Hebrew word »psalterion« each have musical connotations, there must be some connection between biblical psalmody and lyric poetry. Indeed, the liturgical superscriptions of many psalms and the numerous hints to musical instruments and singing within them suggest that many texts were originally used for accompaniment to music and so could be seen as ›lyric poetry‹ in the strictest sense. There are, of course, key differences between ancient and biblical lyric poetry. Hebrew poems are formally marked not so much by metre or rhyme as by more general conventions of sonority and word-play, perhaps to facilitate memorisation. Furthermore, Hebrew poetry is particularly recognizable by its balanced expression of thought, a ›parallelism‹ which includes repeated or contrasting ideas and figurative language. This feature is also evident in some Hebrew prose: this ›blurring of the boundaries‹ between prose and poetry is another feature which distinguishes biblical poetry from ancient Greek or Latin lyric poetry. One other distinctive feature of psalmody is that, although rooted in the liturgy of the first Temple (950–587 BCE), and developing in the liturgy of the second Temple period, it continued to thrive even after the fall of the Temple in 70 CE. The liturgical use of the psalms resulted in its continual prominence throughout Jewish and Christian history; and because the essence of Hebrew poetry is more dependent on sense than sound this has also enabled a rich tradition of translation. So Hebrew psalmody is ›re-invented‹ through the several Greek, Latin, and Aramaic versions, as well as through the many languages of the early modern period, right up to the contemporary vernacular. In this sense psalmody is unusual: unlike ancient classical poetry it provides an ongoing and living tradition for a community of faith.

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