

Writing a Psalm

By Christine Rigden

So you are thinking of having a go at writing a Psalm? I'm going to try to round up some key principles for Biblical poetry that will help you understand the basic recipes available and the differences - like between cake and bread and scones. When you get the gist, you can experiment with white flour or brown, added flavourings, etc.

Biblical poetry is used throughout the Psalms, but also in Proverbs, the Prophets, and sprinkled as songs in other books. I'll include short examples here, but have a look at the Psalms yourself and see how many of these you can recognise.

Language in the Psalms

You are probably used to the idea of poems having a rhyme, and perhaps a rhythm. In Biblical poetry, rhyme is rare, and rhythm a lot more subtle.

The most obvious and recognisable is **PARALLELISM**, the way that two halves of a line are saying nearly the same thing, or perhaps the opposite, for emphasis. If you do just one thing, try for parallelism. Then it's easy to recognise your poem as a psalm.

So for example, look at Psalm 3:1, where both lines are saying much the same thing, but in different words

—

Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!

Alternatively, you can use successive lines to say two different things, each related back to the same theme. You'll not only find this in Psalms, but all over the Book of Proverbs, such as Proverbs 17:22 —

A cheerful heart is good like medicine,
But a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

You can flex this ideal of parallelism a bit, using phrases that build on each other and lead to a conclusion. Have a look at Psalm 139:1-6. This example below is from Joel 1:1-3 -

Hear this, you elders;
listen, all who live in the land.
Has anything like this ever happened in your days
or in the days of your ancestors?
Tell it to your children,
and let your children tell it to their children,
and their children to the next generation.

REPETITION is another pattern used a lot in Biblical poetry. Have a look at how Psalm 150 uses repetition to emphasise praise. Joel 1:4 is a more solemn use, with the repetition a strong underlining of the warning Joel wants to give:

What the locust swarm has left
the great locusts have eaten;
what the great locusts have left
the young locusts have eaten;
what the young locusts have left
other locusts have eaten.

Do you think he's trying hard to get a point across here?

Another common element is **DIRECT LANGUAGE**. Most Biblical language is very down to earth. One way this is achieved is by avoiding the use of adjectives and adverbs. It's a different way of thinking, and tricky to get your head round - but once you're used to it you'll find it quite simple. Adjectives are words that describe the noun they are by. 'Shepherd King' uses Shepherd as an adjective. 'The Lord is my Shepherd' says the same thing without an adjective.

Adverbs describe verbs, as in 'he ran quickly home' where quickly is the adverb describing how he ran. Adverbs often end in -ly, but not always.

Adjectives and adverbs are very common in English, and at first it will seem impossible to avoid them. If you can just do the parallelism, that's great. But this is a fun extra challenge for those who want a go.

Common patterns in Psalms

Sometimes, if you don't know where to begin, it helps to have a bit of a structure, a kind of template, to help you find the words. In English we have many such templates, including limericks, sonnets, villanelles. It is NOT necessary to use these to write a psalm, but some people will find them helpful.

It's useful if you can look up the Psalms referred to here (unless you have memorised them!) and see if you can spot the patterns being described. Psalms mainly come in three types:

Psalms of orientation – what you write when life and faith are happy, settled, reliable and trustworthy, and you are confident. In these Psalms nothing changes in the situation, they just tell it the way it is. They are put together like this:

1. A summary of the way things are with God and people
2. A telling of how God makes a difference or people make choices in a practical situation
3. Praise and thanks to God

Psalms 1, 8 and Psalm 145 are examples.

Psalms of disorientation – these are psalms about when things have gone wrong, there is failure, uncertainty and suffering. These are songs of lament, protest or even complaint. They are put together like this:

1. Speaking to God
2. A complaint or problem
3. A turning point – in spite of this we will, nevertheless
4. A request or call for help
5. A response of praise, trust and hope

Psalms 13, 32 and 88 are examples.

Psalms of Re-orientation – when life has gone through a tough time and come through to find a resolution, a new hope, new possibilities. These are songs of renewed confidence and a sense of being surprised by grace. They recognise that in life we cannot go back but we can look forward. They are put together like this:

1. A call to praise; a call to God and a command for people to praise
2. A reason for praise – telling of the change and difference God has made
3. A new call to praise, to God and people, with this deeper appreciation

Psalms 23, 30 and 103 are examples

Conclusion

There you go, a few simple key elements for writing a psalm. Don't worry if you can't make something 'work' the first time you get words down. I will go through and change a poem I write MANY times!

Think of it like sanding a piece of wood. After you do some sanding, you run your hand over the wood, to find any bits that are less smooth than the rest.

Each time you read your poem, you will see different things that don't quite work how you want. If you are writing it down by hand, that will also help you notice things. Go ahead and change them. Read it aloud to yourself too - you'll find the rough bits are where it's harder to not stumble. You can look up words in an online thesaurus, if the word you have *feels* wrong though it *says* the right thing.

Remember - the point of writing a personal psalm isn't to compose a masterpiece for your church to sing, but to give voice to your own joy and pain. It is your testimony, your prayer to God, and its validity doesn't depend on how skillfully you write. See how you go, and share if you want to, or not. I hope you enjoy the experience!

References

<https://mysonginthenight.com/songwriting/how-to-write-a-personal-psalm/>

<https://www.moortownbaptistchurch.org.uk/bible/write-your-own-psalm>

The Word Made Fresh, a course with The Poetry School (online) Autumn 2016