Psalm 8 Study Guide

Psalm 8 by King James Version of the Bible

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

A psalm is a sacred song, hymn, or poem; usually, the term is associated with the Book of Psalms, a book in the Bible containing 150 of these sacred works. Most of the psalms were originally believed to be written by David, the Hebrew king who lived around 970 B.C. Biblical scholars of recent centuries, however, have come to agree that the psalms are, at least in part, the work of many authors. The Old Testament of the King James Version of the Bible contains the most famous English translation of the psalms. Although the King James Version was finished in 1611, the original Hebrew psalm texts are thought to date between the thirteenth and the third centuries B.C. The predominant theme of the Book of Psalms is the expression of faith in God, but the individual poems have been classified into many forms, including hymns, laments, songs of confidence, and songs of thanksgiving.

"Psalm 8" is a hymn, or a song of praise. In it, the poet meditates upon the grandeur of the night sky and man's seeming insignificance in comparison with it. But the speaker's faith reminds him that man is made in God's image and is thus greater than the rest of God's natural creations. For this reason, man is given dominion over the natural world, but only at a price. Man's first and last thoughts, as they are in the psalm, must be of God. Without such faith, man would be humbled by nature into hopeless insignificance.

Poem Text

O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all
the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou
ordained strength because of thine enemies,
that thou mightest still the enemy and the
avenger.
When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy
fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou
hast ordained;
What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the
son of man, that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him a little lower than the
angels, and hast crowned him with glory
and honour.
Thou madest him to have dominion over the works
of thy hands; thou hast put all things under
his feet:
All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the
field;
The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and
whatsoever passeth through the paths of the
seas.
O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all

the earth

Plot Summary

Line 1:

The first and last verses of the psalm frame the rest, giving the congregation both a part to sing and a means of expressing the key ideas the psalm develops. Those ideas are God's glory and man's closeness to God. The latter is evident in the first line of the verse: The word "Lord" is from the Hebrew *Yahweh,* both a more sacred and a more intimate way of addressing God than *Elohim* (literally, "God"), which appears in other psalms. Though this may reflect the psalm's authorship (some biblical writers consistently chose one name for God over the other), it also expresses the genuine sentiment of the poem. God here is not a distant being, but one with whom man feels an intimate devotion.

When applied to God in the Old Testament, the word "glory" usually refers to God's visible manifestation to humans. The psalmist reflects on this idea in later verses of "Psalm 8," beholding God's creation (the "heavens" in verse 3) and perceiving God's infinite power. But the relationship between God and creation is clear from the outset of the poem: God is "above" everything in nature□ even the heavens themselves.

Line 2:

The second verse expresses the belief that God's power is evident in the least as well as in the greatest of his creations. It also predicts the relationship between man and God described in the third and fourth verses. Just as man perceives God with awe, so "babes" look upon adults. Yet as children are created in the image of adults, so man is in the image of God. Even though they cannot understand the nature of adults, children still possess the same "ordained strength" God has instilled in his creations. Further, that strength is especially apparent because children, like nature, are innocent, as yet uncorrupted by the evil of "the enemy and the avenger." Adults' strength, the psalmist implies later, exists in a similar type of innocence. By experiencing his own humility in the face of the vast universe, man throws himself before God the way a child submits to the authority of adults.

Lines 3-4:

In the third and fourth verses the psalmist experiences what might be called in modem times an "existential crisis," but the cosmic uncertainty inspired by the heavens is hardly limited to modem humans. One might be reminded of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal's conclusion: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me." Observing the night sky, the "moon and the stars," the speaker is forced to ask himself, "What is man?" The question suggests its own answer, one at which most people have arrived while looking into the stars. In comparison with the vast order of the cosmos, man seems finite and insignificant□ so insignificant, in fact, that the psalmist wonders

why God would trifle with such a creature. While the question is never directly answered in the poem, the moment of potential despair resolves itself through other natural observations. Man might seem small compared with the heavens, but he is large compared with the other creatures of earth. In this the psalmist takes faith that God is indeed "mindful" of man. Thus the heavens, which are an indication of God's "glory," are not so much daunting as they are an indication of the grace granted by God to man.

Lines 5-8:

The "glory" in verse 5 is a different type than that in verse 1, coining from a different Hebrew word. When applied to man in the Old Testament, glory usually means "importance," and in verses 5 through 8 the psalmist contrasts man's importance on earth with his seeming insignificance under the stars. Though he is "a little lower than the angels," man is dominant over the other "works of [God's] hands": the domestic and wild animals, the fish and fowl, and the seas themselves. This arrangement recalls the biblical creation story in which God grants man dominion over nature because man is created in God's likeness. In this psalm, man's authority is symbolized by regal trappings: man is "crowned in glory and honor." But importantly, this authority is derived specifically from God. Unlike classical Greek thought, which suggests that man has dignity and authority unto himself, the Hebrew philosophy holds that man's value comes only through God. Why God has granted such value or even created man at all□"What is man?"□are questions the psalmist leaves unanswered.

Lines 19-20:

Note that the refrain, though a repetition of the first verse of the psalm, lacks the line "who hast set thy glory above the heavens." Some argue that this suggests the psalmist now puts earth above the heavens or considers the heavens less relevent. Another possibility is that the psalmist's meditation has eased his fear of the vastness of the cosmos, that he now wishes to acknowledge God's presence on earth and in man.

Themes

God and Religion

One of the main themes recurring throughout the Book of Psalms is God's awesome power. In this particular poem, the first stanza sings about God's greatness and glory. The praise does not continue unabated throughout the following lines, however. By the second line, the poem begins to balance the power of God against the power of God's enemies. It is significant that the power that God ordains, or decrees, in the world comes out of the mouths of humans. It would be impossible for God to have enemies who are more powerful than Himself, because God is omnipotent, but this poem accepts the enemies of God as those who could oppose Him by swaying humans' minds, by turning the human race against Him. God is therefore credited here with instilling humans with an innate sense of His glory, with a sense of him already within "babes and sucklings." The enemies of God are therefore thwarted by humans' worship of Him.

Casting God as a triumphant figure is less important to modem sensibilities than it would have been for the original audience of this psalm centuries ago. The God of the New Testament is characterized as a loving deity whose message is that humans should learn to live together with love, but the people this psalm was written for were more concerned with assuring their own safety against aggression from their own enemies. Overall, Psalm 8 assures the support of God's omnipotent power for his people by offering Him the love of his people. For this reason, it is significant that the poem begins and ends with the phrase "How excellent is thy name ..." This form of praise, in addition to the obvious recognition for God's countless achievements, stresses the fact that God is spoken well of by His people, that His name itself is revered. As stated in the first line, He is, to the singers of the psalm, to those who honor His name, *"our* Lord."

Nature and Its Meaning

In contemporary American thought we are used to viewing human accomplishment as a violation of nature, or at least as a contrast to it. One basic example of this sort of thinking is the way that products are considered better if they are made with natural ingredients instead of artificial ones. "Psalm 8" also makes a distinction between things that are natural and those that are made by humans, but instead of waxing nostalgic for some forgotten time long ago when humans did not dominate nature, this psalm glorifies human dominance. This may be seen as a reflection of the fact that this psalm was written at a time when humans did not control their physical world, or at least when our ability to control our environment was still an open question. The more we have succeeded in fighting hunger, predators, and diseases, the more we have become conscious of what has been lost even as we have won, while the author or authors of "Psalm 8" would only have the struggle against nature's frightening vastness to

consider. As a conscious being, the speaker of this poem considers humanity to be given a right to rule all of nature, a right given by the authority of God Himself. It not only records the situation at the time of its writing by mentioning man's right to rule over the animals that had already been domesticated, the "beasts of the field," it also claims rights over all of the creatures that humanity had not yet been able to control, the ones that still flew or swam freely. The psalm does not question whether it is God's will that humanity dominate the universe, but instead that right is assumed without further examination. Other religions may have developed with a consideration of nature, and Western civilization (which is strongly influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition) only developed a widespread "back to nature" ethic within the last two centuries, as the Industrial Revolution has made humans' domination of nature complete.

Identity

This psalm represents humanity's continuing struggle to understand its significance, to see where it fits between the glorious achievements of God and the baseness of common life on Earth. The answer offered here is that humans are "a little lower than the angels" while still being "crowned" with "glory and honor." The poem conveys some of the psalmist's awe of the vast wonders which God put into place in the universe by leaving the thought addressed in line 3 as an incomplete thought, as if the facts themselves are so incredible that there is no way to finish the idea that is started: the line begins with "When I consider ...," but this thought trails off without ever saying what the speaker does when considering. God's immense power, which is emphasized in the first half of the psalm, is connected to humans in line 4. The relationship may be thought of as slight□the relationship is that God thinks of humans□but it is presented as greatly significant that we get any of God's attention at all. Being thought of by God, the poem implies, must mean that humanity is itself significant. One interesting phrase from this section of the psalm is "the son of man" in line 4. This phrase is generally used to refer to Jesus Christ, although Biblical scholars estimate that the psalms were written five hundred to one thousand years before Christ's birth. The use of this phrase may reflect the influence of later translators, who used these words to fit the rest of Biblical history, or it may have been a forecast of Christ's coming, as is seen in many Old Testament writings.

While identifying humanity with God's greatness, this psalm also identifies humans with the Earthly animals. The questions in line 4 lead the poem forward into thoughts about the animals that God created to live in this world. Although humans are considered to "have dominion" over them, we still live among them, and are in some ways more like them than like God. Humanity can be identified as either God-like or animal-like, and this poem is a meditation on which part of the human identity is more significant. It concludes that the heavenly side dominates: humanity fits closely into line with God and the angels but hovers over the things of the Earth, like them but not really of them.

Style

"Psalm 8" consists of two distinct parts, each playing a precise liturgical role in the ritual in which the poem was meant to be sung. One part was intended to be sung by the entire gathering of worshipers, while the second part was intended to be sung by a soloist. This can be seen in the shift in point of view in the psalm: verses 1 and 9 are written in the first person plural ("O Lord *our* Lord"), but verse 3 is written in the first person singular ("When I consider thy heavens"). Also, the repetition in the first and ninth verses have led scholars to believe that these parts must have been sung collectively.

The verse is the basic unit of ancient Hebrew poetry. Each verse generally completes a thought or reflects on a single aspect of the poem. A chief poetic feature of the verse is rhythm. Though we do not know precisely how ancient Hebrew was pronounced, we can observe that the translated verses contain a rough pattern of stressed syllables. As an example of this, consider the following translated verse from the psalm. When the stressed and unstressed syllables are marked, the verse appears as follows:

Thefowlof theair, and thefish ofthe sea,

And whatso everpas seththroughthepaths of theseas

The reader must remember that the translations of the Psalms can give only an approximation of the original Hebrew rhythms and that tight scansion is often impossible. Still, the artful renderings of the King James Version of the Bible give a good idea of the sound of the original versions. It should also be noted that the rhythm of the verses is enhanced by the repetition of certain phrases. In other words, not only do the syllable stresses fall into a certain pattern, the words themselves repeat to create rhythmic sound. In the above example, the phrase "of the" appears three times in the verse, giving the passage a hypnotic sound that is somewhat like a chant.

Historical Context

Many of the Psalms of the Bible, including Psalm 8, are attributed to David, king of Judah and Israel, who ruled approximately three thousand years ago. David is revered as one of the greatest figures of the Old Testament and is often referred to in later books, which sometimes use the phrase "the House of David" to refer to the Jewish people as a whole and refer to the Messiah as the "Son of David." He was born to a poor rural family, but at an early age he became well-known for his courage and musical skills, and was asked to live in the household of the king of Israel, Saul I, and be his armor bearer. One of the best-known stories in Western history is young David's slaying of the giant Goliath, who was a member of the Philistine tribe that were the enemies of the Israelites. David grew up in Saul's court, became a close friend of Saul's son Jonathon, married Saul's daughter Michal, and led the Israelites to victory in wars against the Philistines. His successes made Saul jealous, though, and he was banished, spending his early adult years wandering the land, gaining the friendship and support of many people, eventually being made king of Hebron in 1000 B.C. After Saul's death David was able to use the army of Hebron and the good will he had gained to defeat Saul's son Ishbosheth and become king of Israel. He was a powerful military leader, leading the army to victory against the Philistines, Moabites, Aramaeans, Edomites, and Ammonites. He captured and built up the city of Jerusalem.

While David is remembered reverently for making Israel a powerful nation for centuries to come, he was also a flawed leader. During the procession that brought the Ark of the Covenant to the resting place he had made for it in Jerusalem, he danced openly and without inhibition, and his wife Michal complained about such vulgar behavior for God's chosen one. Also, one time he stayed home after sending his army into battle, and he became infatuated with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers; he had an affair with her, then ordered her husband into the front lines of battle, where he was killed almost immediately. After that, David's life fell apart. His daughter Tamar was raped by her half-brother Amnon, who was, in turn, killed by his half-brother Absalom. Absalom then went into exile, as David did, and when he returned he too raised a rebellion to take the throne of Israel. The rebellion did not succeed, but David's power over his kingdom diminished as he aged. In the end, the rest of his family abandoned him when he named Solomon, his son by Bathsheba, to follow him instead of his first-born son Adonijah.

Many historians have expressed doubts that David was the author of the Psalms that are ascribed to him. They consider the Psalms to be part of the Pseudepigrapha, which are writings in the Bible that were falsely credited to ancient authors. These historians point out that the phrase that is commonly translated from ancient Hebrew to say "A Psalm of David" may be wrongly translated, or misunderstood. The Hebrew part of speech *le,* which is commonly translated as "of," has many meanings, so that the phrase might better be translated as "a song in the manner of David." Or the authors of the Psalms may have given credit to David as a matter of reverence, to show their deference to his great reputation as the Old Testament's great musician.

There is no way of actually knowing who wrote the psalms that are in the Bible, or when they were written. The psalm form is tightly structured and clear-cut, so historians cannot guess much about a psalm's age from its style. Most of the Near Eastern literatures that we are aware of show some forms of psalms, some dated centuries before the events of David's time. It is clear that the writers of the Biblical psalms used imagery and phrases from other cultures. The Davidic Psalms (those thought to be written by David) may be the oldest, and may date to within a century or two of David's lifetime (he died circa 960 B.C.), although other psalms refer to events as late as 586 B.C.

The English translation of the Bible that is most well-know today is the Authorized Version that was translated by Bible authorities between 1604 and 1611 under the commission of King James I of England (it is commonly called the King James Version). Although Christianity had come to England in the Third Century A.D., the Bible had been available only in Latin until the 1300s, when Protestant reformer John Wycliffe set about translating it, to make it more widely available to people who read English. Over the next two hundred years, different versions were made, reflecting the decisions made by their translators and the sources that the translators used. The King James Bible reflects an attempt to standardize the language, and is noted for the success of its translators in capturing the poetic spirit as well as the meaning of the ancient scriptures. Several other translations have been made in the latter part of this century, attempting to give an accurate rendering of the original Hebrew and Greek languages in modern and easy-to-understand idiom: the Revised Standard Version (1952), the New American Standard Bible (1971-1977), and the New International Version (1978), for example.

Critical Overview

Many critics have commented on the relationships among man, God, and nature in "Psalm 8." Lynn Harold Hough argues that the psalm's depiction of man as sovereign over nature demonstrates a "humanism gloriously free from the tendency to sink into the life of the beast which is below man or to try to be the God who is above him." Hough writes that this psalm is an articulate example of a view of man "from which Old Testament writings never deviate." In his discussion of this psalm, John Patterson brings a scientific perspective to bear. Humans, he argues, have always been terrified by the seemingly infinite cosmos, but never more so than in modern times: "Has not the astronomer told us that he has searched the skies and finds no need of the 'God-hypothesis'?" Patterson contends that the psalmist took a more peaceful view toward the stars. "They brought him comfort and blessing," he writes. "The stars spoke of divine greatness; they revealed God's majesty and power. They were the work of his fingers□and what fingerwork!" Finally, the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm writes about the final verse's omission of the phrase "Who hast set thy glory above the heavens." In the beginning of the psalm, he argues, the poet equates God's glory on earth and in heaven. "The psalm ends in the full confirmation on *this life* and man's strength on earth," Fromm writes. "The thought of heaven is eliminated in order to emphasize fully this earth, and man on it, is full of God's glory."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Emily Archer holds a Ph.D. in English from Georgia State University, has taught literature and poetry at several colleges, and has published essays, reviews, interviews, and poetry in numerous literary journals. In this essay, Emily Archer explores the implications for the way sacred texts are read, focusing on the Judaic commentaries known as midrash.

According to one Jewish creation story, when God resolved to create human beings on the sixth day, he sought the counsel of the angels before mixing the appropriate amounts of dust and breath. "The angels were not all of one opinion," says this legend from Louis Ginzberg's collection of *midrash.* The Angels of Love and Truth were at odds, as were the Angels of Peace and Justice. In the foreknowledge with which they are endowed in these stories, the angelic host are under no illusion that humankind's crown "of glory and honor" would be prone to slip and crack. Thus, some of the angels were less than enthusiastic, but managed to ask politely, "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?" Those, God could placate with a simple reply: "The fowl of the air and the fish of the sea, what were they created for? Of what avail a larder full of appetizing dainties, and no guest to enjoy them?" Other angels posed the question in jealous scorn: "What is man that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man that Thou visitest him?!" To those, God's reply was swift and simple: he "stretched forth His little finger" and set them aflame. Raphael's band of angels took note of such a fate and wisely decided instead to affirm the Almighty's plan: "Lord of the world, it is well that Thou has thought of creating man."

The original setting of "What is man ... ?" is Psalm 8. The angels in this story have simply "borrowed" it to take their various stands on the proposed creation of human beings. In its text of origin, the question expresses David's humble wonder at his honorable place in the order of creation. In all its reverent playfulness with the Torah (the sacred Hebrew scriptures), the story from the *midrash* takes David's question "out of context" and puts it into the mouths of the angels. Re-imagined and relocated in this way, the question "What is man ... ?" serves the rabbinic storyteller anew in his sacred purpose: to keep the story of God's covenant with creation alive through re-imaginations of the scriptures, through fresh interpretations of the relationship between humanity and divinity.

"What is man ... ?" is a question as old as human consciousness itself, and has been asked, in various ways, in every time and place. In Psalm 8, the question and its answer belong "first" to the consciousness of the ancient Hebrew, to a Jewish cosmology, to the Torah and its commentaries. But the psalm portrays a cosmic beauty and a human dignity hard for other peoples and religions to resist. Christianity, for one, has "borrowed" not only Psalm 8, but the Hebrew Bible itself, calling it the Old Testament. Through its account of the appearance of Jesus Christ in history, the New Testament, as some Christians would say, "fulfills" or "completes" the Old. In Paul's letter to the Hebrews, one of the "epistles" of the New Testament, the words of Psalm 8 are borrowed outright to delineate the features of this new world and its Lord. The "one in a

certain place" below is, of course, the poet David, contemplating the starry sky of the Near East. But Paul suggests that David's words "testify" not simply to David's God, Yahweh, and his own wondrous present, but to the "new" Adam, Jesus Christ, and the age he would usher in:

But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honor, and didst set him over the works of thy hands; Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor.... (Hebrews 2:5-9)

Once borrowed, no text stays the same. Words do new work in new settings. Christian theology and its world-view are heavily indebted to its Jewish roots, but the departures from Judaism are also profound, and too complex and extensive to begin to assess here.

The *midrash,* however, provides a glimpse into the way Jewish scriptural tradition has borrowed texts from itself, not necessarily with an eye toward "completing" anything; rather, to take a narrative detail, character, passage, or word in as many directions as Judaism's essential theology will allow. Both the poet of Psalm 8 and his words thus appear in other contexts worth examining, settings that help profile the shape of Jewish cosmology and bring interpretations within its own imaginative traditions into focus.

Midrash is a term for those commentaries on the Torah which flourished from the third to the twelfth centuries A. D., but which continue, in new and eclectic forms, to be created in the present day. In the early twentieth century, Louis Ginzberg collected *midrash* from its classical period and assembled them into four volumes called *The Legends of the Jews* (1909). Volume One begins with the creation, and Volume Four concludes with Esther and the return of the captivity. In her ongoing work with "visual theology," artist Jo Milgrom today describes *midrash* in her essay in *Parabola: Crossroads* as "both a method and a genre of literature in which imaginative interpretation discovers biblical meanings that are continually contemporary." The *midrash* are highly "intertextual," to use a recent term in literary criticism. Intertextual-ity is one way of describing what happens when texts speak with, gossip about, or otherwise refer to other texts. Sometimes the purpose is to enhance, embroider, elaborate, or fabulate a text; other times to subvert, deny, expose, or make ironic. Thus, in-tertextuality is all about the dynamic relationships between, within, and among passages of writing.

The *midrash* displays all those rich possibilities. In their endless play upon the Torah, no one *midrashic* interpretation or legend is definitive, decisive, or "correct." No one rabbi, theologian, school, or sect has the final word. Jewish tradition believes that it takes every interpretation, in every place and time, to keep the sacred powers of the text alive. With every commentary or story comes fresh understanding of God's unfolding design both for the Jewish people in history and for creation. "Midrash is to the Bible what

imagination is to knowledge," Jo Milgrom suggests. The Torah stands firm, but not static, at the center of the imaginative company of words that dance around it.

The impulse to perform *midrash* is as old as the Hebrew scriptures themselves. In fact, the Torah contains its own *midrash,* as one can clearly see in numerous instances of one passage of scriptural referring to another, and for a variety of purposes: to bolster the authority of a prophecy, to remind God of his help in the past in order to ask for a favor in the present, to borrow an image that elevates the beauty of a praise, or the poignancy of a lament. David's Psalm 8 is itself a kind *of midrash* on the creation story in the Book of Genesis. It comments on Genesis in poem form, condensing the ordered sequence of the creation described in the first chapter, day one through day six, into lyrical praise for the Creator and the whole design of the cosmos. "Like many lyric poems," says Robert Alter *inThe Art ofBiblical Poetry,* "[Psalm 8] is the complex realization of one moment of perception," as though the poet arrests time and perceives all the divinely ordained cosmos at once.

The writers of *midrash* capitalized on this strong connection between David the King who tended sheep, and Adam the "crown" and caretaker of creation. In fact, as one legend goes, in a measure David was indebted for his life to Adam. At first only three hours of existence had been allotted to him. When God caused all future generations to pass in review before Adam, he besought God to give David seventy of the thousand years destined for him. A deed of gift, signed by God and the angel Metatron, was drawn up. Seventy years were legally conveyed from Adam to David, and in accordance with Adam's wishes, beauty, dominion, and poetical gift went with them. Thus, in this story, not only do the animals pass in front of the first man to receive their names, but all future generations of human beings as well. This story attributes to Adam a power greater than that which the Torah's text explicitly states, but which it implicitly permits to the writer of *midrash.* In this expansion of his privilege and responsibility, Adam petitions God to grant the shepherd-king both longer life and those very gifts that made the writing of a poem such as Psalm 8 possible: "beauty, dominion, and poetical gift." As if in gratitude, not only to God, but to Adam, David writes a song in which beauty and dominion are the content, and in which poetical gift dictates the language and form.

But as that particular *midrash* proceeds, we learn that "Beauty and talent, Adam's gifts to David, did not shield their possessor against hardship." Legend complicates David's birth-status, rendering his father Jesse pious, but vulnerable to temptation. As a result of a series of deceptions, David is born the "supposed son of a slave," and therefore consigned to the lowly, lonely position of tending Jesse's sheep in the desert. There in the wilderness, David proves not only his intelligence in shepherding, but his physical prowess as well: "one day he slew four lions and three bears, though he had no weapons." So the *midrash* continues, in stories of David's trials with dangerous beasts, jealous kings, embittered court scholars, and, of course, with the giant Goliath. Both in humble tasks and feats of brave wit and strength, David proves himself worthy of becoming king of Israel. The story of his anointing in the *midrash* is embroidered with magic and miracle, as the drops of oil in the horn flowed of their own accord and "on his garments changed into diamonds and pearls."

Yet, while this human has been made "a little lower than the angels" and "crowned ... with glory and honor," there is also the undeniable presence of the "enemy and the avenger" in Psalm 8, as well as in the sacred stories. David may have the upper hand as he engages in battle with the mammoth "reem," a beast he mistakes at first for a mountain. But the "enemy" is also grievously, intimately human in the person of his own son Absalom, who ultimately dies at the hands of David's army. The "avenger" is politically dangerous in the form of jealous king Saul, whose son Jonathan befriends David and nearly dies for doing so.

God has enemies, too, as the second verse of Psalm 8 suggests. But these are enemies of a different order, and the means of their conquest is not what one would expect: "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies." How might the babbling of an infant vanquish an enemy, we may ask skeptically. But David's God often turns the tables of power, and catches human assumptions by surprise. The psalmist somehow recognizes that within this paradox, strength does not belong solely to the physical realm. By extension, perhaps, neither does "dominion." "Babes and sucklings" are the perfect image of innocence, in all the strength of new-made perfection. The profound strength of innocence is suggested in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "God's Grandeur": despite the fact that "all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell," yet "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

The next verses in Psalm 8 proceed, in part, as an elaboration of that paradox of strength-in-weak-ness. Humankind is as tiny and powerless as an infant in contrast to the "work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars," the vast spangled heaven, which "thou hast ordained." But the context is now the whole of creation, rendering the "enemy" more than natural or political. The enemy is cosmic. It is chaos, in its many guises. If Psalm 8 is essentially a praise for cosmic order, the enemy would therefore be anything that threatens a return to disorder and formlessness.

The inescapable darkness of the world-as-it-is is implied in Psalm 8 by the presence of enemies. Were it not for this shadow, Psalm 8 would deliver an image of the created cosmos in its purity and original blessing. But the poet David was well aware of the suffering and loss that being human necessarily entails. The question he wails in Psalm 22 is the opposite of the question he sings in Psalm 8: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" This is the cry of the human being in exile from home, the misery of feeling abandoned by God. The poignancy of being so forsaken is all the more keen in light of the intimacy intended between human and divine, the relationship at the heart of the Jewish world view. The Torah declares that human beings are made *imago Dei,* in the image of God, and their purpose on earth is to participate in, reflect, and return divine glory:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them (Gen. 1: 26-27).

In Psalm 8, the *imago Dei* is not limited to its expression in humankind; God's name is "excellent ... in all the earth." The psalmist praises God in terms of language itself, the omnipresence of the divine name. From star-studded sky to ocean depths, no element of creation is excluded from David's exaltation; the poet "reads" the signature of God in "all." But the first verse suggests that while the Creator's glory is certainly reflected within creation, it is important to see that its origin is somehow also beyond creation," *above* the heavens." God's name, or presence, is both imminent and transcendent. "Thy name" both opens and closes Psalm 8, symbolically enveloping all of creation. In this psalm and the cosmology it reflects, the name of God is both the first word and the last.

Jewish tradition teaches that the world is created through words. God created the world by uttering "Let there be ... ", and "it was so"□light, darkness, birds, fish, seas, plants, dry land. For the Hebrew, the word precedes all. Language constitutes reality. According to one *midrash,* there was a beginning prior even to the beginning of "heaven and earth" related in Genesis, and it consisted of "seven things." The first of those seven is "the Torah written with black fire on white fire, and lying in the lap of God." Here the sacred scripture is embodied as a feminine being from whom God, her intimate, seeks counsel when he "resolved upon the creation of the world." The letters of the alphabet likewise take human form in their descent from God's crown "whereon they were engraved with a pen of flaming fire." "Create the world through me!" each letter entreats in the *midrash,* each supplying a reason to be the agent of divine design. One by one, the twenty-two Hebrew letters present their case, and one by one nearly every one is refused. For example, "Pe had *Podeh,* redeemer, to its credit, but *Pesha',* transgression, reflected dishonor upon it.... *Yod* at first sight seemed the appropriate letter for the beginning of creation, on account of its association with *Yah,* God, if only *Yezer ha-Ra,* the evil inclination, had not happened to begin with it, too. One by one each is discredited, except for the humble *Alef,* "who had refrained from urging its claims." But ultimately, God grants the place of honor to *Bet,* as *Bet* begins the primary words of praise, "blessed be": "Blessed be the Lord forever. Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord." In Psalm 8, the poet "considers" and praises this state of cosmic blessing.

Besides the emphasis on the creative power of language, Psalm 8 also praises the power of craft, of making. God's craftsmanship is evident in both his handwork in the earth, and in the glory he has "set" above the heavens. The phrase "work of thy fingers" implies not only a shaping, but a refined, even delicate, finishing. In this theophany, or divine manifestation, God proves to be a craftsman of great manual dexterity, on intimate terms with his tools and materials. In their Greek origins, the words "chaos" and "cosmos" were opposites, the one being "formless disorder," and the other, "harmonious order." God the craftsman brings cosmos out of chaos with the materials at hand; God the poet makes a world out of words of blessing. Thus, the creation David praises is distinguished by a beauteous order, a shining display of letters that descend through the "chain of being" in which every living thing has its divinely ordained place. In its innocent state, creation is filled with "handmade" harmonies among every sphere of life.

Humankind's "ordained place" is between animal and spirit, "just a little lower than the angels," yet a little higher, the psalm implies, than the "sheep and oxen, yea, and the

beasts of the field." Adam and Eve are a curious mixture of earth and heaven, a balance of the humble and exalted, both frail and wondrous. The Jewish world-picture is clear about the earthiness of human origin. "Why," asks David, "would God 'visit' the human creature"; after all, as David knows, "the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7). The name "Adam" itself comes from the Hebrew *adamah,* or ground. One *midrash* asks why "God created man on the sixth day and not earlier," and its answer is, "to teach him the lesson of humility, for even the lowly insect, which was created on the fifth day, preceded man in the order of creation." Psalm 8 expresses this dual nature strategically by asking "What is man ... ?" Positioned between the celestial beauty over which he has no power and the beasts in his care, the psalmist can only ask a humble, if not somewhat rhetorical, question. That the same God who fashioned the constellations with his "fingers" would not only "visit" a being made of dust, but also "crown him with glory and honor" is cause for great wonder.

But as the angels knew, humans would not stay "in place," and would soon betray the glory that distinguished them in the grand, original scheme of things. After Adam and Eve reintroduce chaos into the world, the gift of "dominion" becomes troublesome. "Dominion" quickly degenerates into "domination," and to an irrevocable link in history with crusades of political oppression and ecological disaster. There is no escaping the fact that for modern, ecologically-minded readers of the Bible, "dominion" calls up a consumptive, adversarial role with nature. The "bad" definitions of "dominion" seem to have become license for human arrogance and greed, with consequences far more extensive than dying coral reefs, smog alerts, and retreating wetlands can even begin to suggest. "Dominion" comes originally from the Latin "dominus," "Lord" or "king." In the original psalmic utterance, being granted "dominion" was part of being created *imago Dei.* Humankind would be "lord" in relation to "all things under his feet." The original design of human lordship was to be a reflection of the Lord God. And human "dominion" would mirror the "Dominus Deus" whose divine power seeks the welfare of each created thing in its relation to the entire cosmic order. Unfortunately, "lordship" has also been corrupted in its associations with slavery, oppression, and human rights abuses. And "dominion" smacks of a decidedly feudal worldview sanctioned by interpretations of Genesis which lead to power for the benefit of an elite few, and oppression for the rest.

The cosmogonies of other ancient peoples offer quite a different relationship among divinity, humankind, and nature. According to the Australian Aboriginal creation story, the eternal ancestors slept beneath the surface of the earth, until they awoke and wandered the bare plain. As they journeyed, they found unfinished human beings, half-formed of animals or plants. It was the ancestors'

task to finish their making, and then return to sleep in the shape of a rock, hill, water-hole, or tree. The Aborigines believe, therefore, that every human being is a transformation of nature; thus each has an intimate allegiance to his or her "totem," animal, plant, or rock. In Aboriginal cosmology, there is no higher or lower form, no vertical chain of descent from more divine to less.

Native American traditions understand nature as an interdependent democracy of being, a fragile and intricately interconnected web, rather than a descending chain in which

one life form is less sentient of God than another. In the words of Chief Seattle, "We did not make the web; we are merely a strand in it." At the beginning of Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony,* the main character, a Laguna Indian, holds in his damaged psyche the seemingly irreconcilable clash between the Native American worldview and that of post-World War II United States. Tayo returns home from the horrors of war in the Pacific nearly destroyed in mind and body, yet finds himself mysteriously "ordained" to help heal his homeland and restore the spiritual life of his people. In the process, his own healing occurs. The journey to wholeness begins as Tayo is reminded of his relationship to the earth and its creatures, evident even in the ceremony that follows the killing of a deer: They sprinkled the cornmeal on the nose and fed the deer's spirit. They had to show their love and respect, their appreciation; otherwise, the deer would be offended, and they would not come to die for them the following year .... He felt humbled by the size of the full moon, by the chill wind that swept wide across the foothills of the mountain. They said the deer gave itself to them because it loved them, and he could feel the love as the fading heat of the deer's body warmed his hands. It is not difficult to see the poet of Psalm 8, like a double exposure, standing behind this image on his own foothills in the Near East night, crafting praise for the presence of love within creation, even in the practice of "dominion."

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell, the popular scholar of world mythology, has this to say of the "biblical" relationship of man and nature:

Moyers: Don't you think modern Americans have rejected the ancient idea of nature as a divinity because it would have kept us from achieving dominance over nature? How can you cut down trees and uproot the land and turn the rivers into real estate without killing God? *Campbell:* Yes, but that's not simply a characteristic of modern Americans, that is the biblical condemnation of nature which they inherited from their own religion and brought with them, mainly from England. God is separate from nature, and nature is condemned of God. It's right there in Genesis: we are to be the masters of the world. But if you will think of ourselves as coming out of the earth, rather than having been thrown in here from somewhere else, you see that we are the earth, we are the consciousness of the earth. These are the eyes of the earth. And this is the voice of the earth.

Campbell's response is not actually to the text of the Bible itself, to Genesis or Psalm 8. It is a response to the way the biblical words have been interpreted, to the way the text has been "inherited," and to the consequences of that interpretation in the world. The text in Genesis indeed commands the first pair to have dominion over all things, and David borrows it for the purposes of his psalm-poem. Those words, taken out of original context, have often become license under "the authority of God" to conquer and divide, rather than cooperate and protect "the beasts of the field" and "the fish of the sea." It would have been more accurate for Campbell to lament that certain appropriations of the text "condemn" nature.

The Torah tells a story of original blessing, not condemnation. "Let there be .... and it was good" is the enduring refrain of the world's beginnings. The devout Jew prays at the beginning of every day, "O God, the soul which you have implanted in me is a pure

one□you created it, you molded it, you breathed it into me...." Jews believe that because the human soul is derived from the breath of God, humankind is inherently pure and good. The *midrash* expresses this in its high praise for Adam's newly-created perfection: His person was so handsome that the very sole of his foot obscured the splendor of the sun. His spiritual qualities kept pace with his personal charm, for God had fashioned his soul with particular care. She is the image of God, and as God fills the world, so the soul fills the human body.... The perfections of Adam's soul showed themselves as soon as he received her, indeed, while he was still without life.

To stay alive, texts depend on readers. And readers in turn, have responsibility for the ways their interpretations, which are also "texts," continue creation, or destroy it. Words make the world. In a recent "psychological" interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, *Creation Continues,* Fritz Kunkel urges a direction for human consciousness that shares the essential paradoxes and humility of the ancient Psalm 8:

The way up is the way down; to grow mature means to become like children__Not the egocentric arrogance of the human mind which stresses our superiority over animals and plants, but humble open mindedness allowing us to admire, discover, and learn their secrets, is the helpful attitude. 'Behold the birds ... consider the lilies.' That means to spend many hours of meditation on the mysteries of animal and vegetal life. We might then discover that we share their mysteries.

At the turn of the new millennium, the world seems hungry for stories that may somehow reverse the tide of "dominion" gone wrong, for new *midrash* that, in their imaginative power to transform, may "still the enemy and the avenger" of the world's health and peace.

Source: Emily Archer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

David Kelly is an instructor of literature and writing at several community colleges in Illinois, as well as a fiction writer and playwright. In the following essay, he considers the structure of "Psalm 8 " to see what it can tell us about the values of the people who wrote it.

Like much great writing of ancient times, from the epic of Gilgameshto the Old Testament, "Psalm 8" can be read as serving dual religious and social functions. It can be seen as a prayer, and there is no doubt that it is this function that has enabled it to survive throughout the generations. Even readers who lack religious sentiment, though□who take the "God" that prayers refer to as a personification of humanity's greatest fears and ambitions□ can see in "Psalm 8" a snapshot of the human psyche as it was in the process of developing, and compare it to the way that the world is experienced today.

As a prayer, this psalm is a song of praise, with no particular overt request made of God, just an expression of His excellence. This method of speaking to God and telling him that He is great might seem a little pointless at first, since God certainly would not need humans to verify His greatness, but it is effective as an exercise in focusing the attention of large groups who are praying. It might be wrong to think of the psalm as being so presumptuous as to offer human goodwill or some kind of affirmation to the Creator of the Universe, who has presumably gotten along fine without it, but the praise and affirmation in the psalm do serve the function of making the people who speak or sing it more conscious of God's greatness. A line like "the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained," is effective because it makes the person saying it, not God, think about God's achievements. This may be the only way that the human mind can hope to grasp achievements of such magnitude.

Since the prayer is one of praise, then it is best that it sets forth a list of specifics about God's greatness, rather than filling the air with vacant superlatives that just repeat the idea of greatness over and over. In general, the Psalms of David follow this pattern, making a broad claim in the first few lines and then commencing to provide vivid, sense-related details throughout the long middle segment, finally closing with a repetition of the opening declaration or exclamation, often using the same words. For converts and children who were first being brought into the faith, this type of poetry helped keep the goals of religion within focus and provided a general outline that could be filled in by stories of Yahweh's interactions with the chosen people in earlier books.

The reader can see a reflection in the concerns expressed in "Psalm 8," of a community bound by their religion. They felt themselves to be God's chosen ones and yet were at the same time uneasy enough and self-conscious enough (when talking to Him) to take an accounting of their own position. Tribes of the ancient Biblical times survived by thinking of society, and not the individual, as the most important human unit. While people in the modern world conceive of society as a tool, here to serve people and make their lives among other people work out more smoothly, the flow of responsibility

would have gone in the other direction for the people who originally created and repeated "Psalm 8." Looking at this psalm, the reader can tell that all of humanity was not what was meant when "man" was referred to: although the psalm uses the word "man" in the way that modern people usually do to indicate all human beings, it also mentions a separate category of enemies who do not seem to be counted among the same group of people as those who were reciting the psalm.

This psalm, conspicuously, reveals a hierarchy in the universe as it marvels at things that have come to be that way (but shows little interest in how or why things came to be so, other than accepting it as God's will). In the King James version, the poem specifies that man is "a little lower" than the angels. Angels are mentioned nowhere else in this cosmology, and their sudden introduction seems forced, as if they were added at a different time by a different author. The Revised Standard Version, published in 1952, was put together using the King James Version, more recent discoveries of ancient Hebrew texts, and nearly three hundred and fifty years of additional scholarship. In the Revised Standard Version (RSV), man is said to be "little less than God," leaving the angels out of the picture altogether. This approach does help streamline the cosmology by removing the distracting and perhaps unnecessary element, but it also removes the sense of gradation that makes readers feel that humanity is being specifically located in the universe. In the RSV, the universe has become more of a duality, with God and man against everything else. This seems to fit more comfortably with contemporary thought, but it loses the fullness of the King James version where angels added to the abundance of life in the universe.

The modern worldview does not emphasize the fact that God has "crowned (humanity) with glory and honor." One of the most interesting aspects of "Psalm 8" is the litany of creatures between lines 7 and 8 that serve as a reminder of humanity's greatness. The range suggested in these two brief lines is a staggering example of poetic compression, covering all animal life while at the same time managing to be specific. Domain over the domesticated beasts of the fields was of course the most important thing for people of an agrarian culture, and could perhaps have been highlighted more prominently in this psalm. But a more thought-provoking concept is the dominion over the creatures of the sky and sea as well. Like everything else in this psalm, there is the implication of the natural order that determines what is important by way of relationships. In this case, that order is centered around the sea and having access to the sea, which might naturally occupy the minds of people who had lived in the desert. The variety and magnificence of land-locked creatures who lived in, say, a jungle or forest, might not have occurred to the psalmists. Their eyes turned from desert to sea, from nomadic culture to the relatively recent developments of agriculture□the free-roaming creatures of the earth would probably have been out of their field of vision.

The cosmology of "Psalm 8" is thorough, and goes in descending order: God, moon and stars, angels, humans, domesticated animals, fish and fowl, and then the wild animals that appear now and then, drawn to the water. The high ranking of humans is an acknowledged mystery, according to the questions in line 4, but it is nonetheless accepted. More perplexing is the power that the psalm ascribes to enemies. Line 2 specifically states that it is God's enemies being discussed, but it does not specify who

these enemies of God would be. It is possible that the enemy facing God is of a different category than man, except that the phrase "still the enemy and the avenger" implies that God's enemy is indeed human. These two ways of reading it present widely different implications for both the worldview of the poem and its structural integrity. If God's enemies are other celestial beings, such as the hoards of daemons mentioned elswhere in the Bible and perhaps closely associated with the early formative days of the Hebrew religion, then a place can be found for them in the order of the universe, most likely in the vicinity of angels but above humans. If God's enemies are human, though, the measurements of God's awesome power are turned backward in a way that reads almost like farce. Power over human enemies, which should hardly need mentioning, is given precedence over His ability to create the moon and stars and to delegate power to humanity. The question "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" changes from a humble, slightly proud recognition that humans might be important enough to warrant some of God's attention to an arrogant claim that God feels human enemies enough of a threat to keep an eye on them.

"Psalm 8" represents a primitive people's attempt to juggle the difficult tasks of praising God, assuring themselves that their enemies represent little threat, and define their place in the spectrum of life in the universe. Because of different translations and different possible interpretations, it sometimes seems to address itself to different concerns: read casually, this psalm might appear to have two or three subjects. The key value, of course, is what this poem tells us about ourselves. Like the ancient Hebrews, modern humans are nervous about those who wish them harm but are confident about their ability to dominate the universe. They do not judge ourselves in relation to angels, but they do still find themselves the favorites of heaven. Perhaps even more today than in ancient times, people are inclined to jump from considering the magnificence of the universe to reflecting, "What is man?"

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

Dove Entertainment presents *The Book of Psalms* with Michael York on audio compact disk (1995).

Modern Library/BBC Audio Books have produced the audiocassette entitled *The Book of Psalms and the Book of Proverbs: The Authorized Edition* (1996) with David Suchet and Hannah Gordon.

Victory Technology has produced a CD-ROM entitled *Psalms: Book I* (1999) as part of the Bible Savers series.

Treehaus Communications has produced a videocassette entitled *Psalms of Joy* (1986).

FresnoPacific University has produced an audio compact disc entitled *O Lord Our God, How Excellent Is Thy Name* (1999) with the Fresno Pacific University Concert Choir.

Zondervan publishers have produced *The Old Testament from the New Revised Edition* as tape 23 of a 36 audiocassette set (1983).

Caedmon has produced an audiocassette entitled *The Psalms and The Tale of David* (1956) with Dame Judith Anderson.

Marty Goetz Ministries has produced an audiocassette entitled *Psalm Enchanted Evening* (1998) with Marty Goetz.

Topics for Further Study

Rewrite this poem as a business memo, explaining each point to your associates.

Why do you think this psalm is addressed to God, who would presumably be aware of all of the accomplishments the writer ascribes to Him?

Choose some of the marvels of the modern world that you would praise God for in a psalm that you would write. Make a collage, either with pictures or with recorded sounds, that puts these wonders on display.

Compose a musical tune that you think would be appropriate for singing this psalm, and record your version.

Compare and Contrast

1611: English explorer Henry Hudson disappeared after sailing into the interior of the wilderness in the Northeast part of the continent, trying to find a passage into the interior. He only made it into a shallow strait before being icebound and then abandoned by mutineers who took over his ship.

Today: Hudson's name is known across the globe because his name was given to the famous Hudson River, which borders New York City.

1611: William Shakespeare, who died in 1616, was in the last phase of his career, creating complex, mature tragicomedies such as *Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale,* and *The Tempest.*

Today: Shakespeare's reputation as a playwright has yet to be surpassed.

1611: England's King James I is a supporter of the doctrine of the divine rights of kings. This doctrine maintains that royal personages had to answer to no one but God for their decisions.

Today: The British royalty has only symbolic significance. Real political power is held by the elected Parliament. With their personal lives under scrutiny of the media, members of the British royal family are constantly the subject of ridicule.

1611: The settlers of Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in America, tried to recover after the devastating winter of 1609-1610, referred to as the "Starving Time."

Today: The hardships of the Jamestown Colony are remembered at Thanksgiving, when Americans celebrate the later time, in the 1620s, when the colony began producing bountiful harvests.

1611: The Virginia colony started growing tobacco for the first time.

Today: At almost six billion pounds produced annually, tobacco is such an important part of the American economy that the government is reluctant to regulate its production, even as associated health risks become evident.

What Do I Read Next?

Thomas Merton, one of the best-read writers on religious matters of this century, wrote a brief book in 1956 called *Praying the Psalms* that is still in print. It reflects Merton's thoughtful blend of Christianity with Zen Buddhism.

Dover Thrift Editions published a copy of *The Book of Psalms* that is available for under one and a half dollars.

Poet Stephen Mitchell translated fifty of the best-known psalms from their ancient Hebrew sources and published them under the title *A Book of Psalms* in 1994. His interpretations are graceful and enlightening.

Gwendolyn Sims Warren's 1998 collection *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit: 101 Best-Loved Psalms, Gospel Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the African-American Church* (published by Henry Holt) draws the connection from the Book of Psalms to contemporary religious music.

The Abbey Psalter: The Book of Psalms Used by the Trappist Monks of the GeneseeAbbey was published by the Paulist Press in 1981. It is a large, artistic book rendered in calligraphy.

In 1997 Priests for Equality published a new translation of the Psalms, carefully avoiding wording that is biased against women. The result of their work is *The Inclusive Psalms,* offering a modern interpretation that is more in-tune with today's sensibilities.

Hermann Gunkel, one of the twentieth century's most respected Biblical scholars, was working on his book about the Psalms at the time of his final illness in 1931, so he turned over his work to one of his students. The resulting work, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* is available today with Gunkel, Joachim Begrich, and James D. Nogal-ski listed as authors.

Nahum M. Sarna, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies atBrandeis University, examines the Psalms in perspective in his 1995 book *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel.*

Further Study

Dahood, Mitchell, *Psalms I: 1-50,* Garden City, NY: 1956. This is Volume 16 of the thirty-eight volume Anchor Bible commentary set. In this book Psalm 8 is accompanied by four pages of notes that refer to previous translations, cross-references, and related literature.

Fosdick, Harry Emerson, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible: The Development of Ideas Within the Old and New Testament,* New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956.

Fosdick offers a chronology of the ideas according to categories: "The Idea of Right and Wrong," "The Idea of Man," "The Idea of God," etc.

Frye, Northrop, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature,* New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

Frye, one of the most respected literary critics of modern times, examines the Bible, not *as* literature, but as a historically significant document that uses many literary techniques.

Gabel, John B., and Charles B. Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction,* New York:Oxford University Press, 1986.

This book gives short treatment to the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha, which the psalms may belong to, but it is thorough in its information.

Gordon, Cyrus H., and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East,* 4th ed., New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997.

This largely historical work examines the ancient world that the Psalms emerged from, relating the style and structure of the Psalms to non-Biblical sources of the same time period.

The OxfordHistory of the Biblical World, edited by Michael D. Coogan, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. This large, illustrated volume is intended for use as a reference. It is a comprehensive source regarding the way that Biblical thought developed from its earliest history.

Bibliography

Alter, Robert, *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* New York: Basic Books, 1985.

--------, "Psalms," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible,* edited

by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, Cambridge: The Bel-lknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.

Campbell, Joseph, with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth,* New York: Doubleday, 1988.

Fromm, Erich, "The Psalms," in *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Traditions,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966, pp. 201-24.

Ginzberg, Louis, *The Legends of the Jews,* 4 vols., Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909-1938.

Gottcent, John H., *The Bible: A Literary Study,* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Hough, Lynn Harold, "The Battle with Doubt and the Lyrical Voices," in *The Meaning of Human Experience,* Abing-ton-Cokesbury Press, 1945, pp. 119-35.

Kunkel, Fritz, *Creation Continues,* New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

Milgrom, Jo, essay in *Parabola: Crossroads.*

Patterson, John, "The Divine Revelation," in *The Praises of Israel: Studies Literary and Religious in the Psalms,* Scrib-ner's, 1950, pp. 170-91.

Silko, Leslie Marmon, *Ceremony,* New York: Viking Press, 1977.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535