

# BRIERCREST

## BLST 714 Psalms: The Poetry of Prayer Winter 2019

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Course Dates: January 28 – February 1, 2019

3 Credit Hours

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course offers students an encounter with the vitality of the Israelite Psalms tradition. An exploration of various critical approaches to the study of these texts is accompanied by an investigation of the ways in which the Psalms have served as a resource for subsequent theological, literary, and liturgical traditions.

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To acquire a broad knowledge of the book of Psalms in terms of content, themes, and theological purposes for its composition.
2. To understand this sweeping and expansive poetic collection as a sophisticated and highly nuanced work of theology, with all its attendant complexities.
3. To perform competent exegesis of selected Psalms with sufficient literary appreciation and theological depth.
4. To study the theology of the Psalter with a sense of humility and awe, and recognize some of the various ways this poetry has been received over the centuries.
5. To take preliminary steps toward disseminating the messages of the Psalms to various audiences in the academic world and the church.

### COURSE TEXT

William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

Any other course materials will be provided as handouts or electronically.

We should also bring a copy of the Bible – ideally two different reliable translations – for each lecture.

*Students are expected to refer to Briercrest Seminary's Format and Style Guides and Guide for Writing Research Papers, available as PDF documents here: <https://www.mybriercrest.ca/seminary/documents/>.*

*These texts are available in store and online at the Briercrest Bookstore: <http://briercrest.ca/bookstore>.*

*Students are responsible for course materials and communication on Canvas (<https://briercrest.instructure.com>; cf. <http://briercrest.ca/online/canvas>) and their myBriercrest.ca email account.*

## OUTLINE OF TOPICS

Within the library of the world's classics, the book of Psalms occupies a unique place. Few books were composed over a longer period of time and have exercised more cultural and religious influence than the Psalms, the longest and most complex collection in the Hebrew Bible and arguably one of the most illustrious and durable texts in history. Nearly 1,000 years in the making with dozens of contributors, this ancient anthology includes 150 prayers and poems for a host of public occasions and private exigencies, and altogether exhibits a surprising array of historical memories and theological reflections. This course is an introduction to the world of the Psalms that focuses on the content and the poetic forms that are encountered in the collection, guiding the reader toward an appreciation of the purposes of the Psalms, and their contributions to biblical theology and the Christian faith. Along with background discussion on the development of the Psalms and an overview of the variety and genres of these poetic texts, there is also some discussion about why the book contains some of the most famously comforting lines in history ("Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," Ps 23:4) and some of the most violent imprecations ("Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth," Ps 58:6). Rather than abstract theorizing, this course features close readings of numerous psalms so that the student can explore the poetically-framed questions raised in the Psalms, ranging from the problem of evil and the silence of God to issues of philosophical speculation, practical atheism ("the fool says in his heart, 'There is no God!'" Ps 14:1), and even life after death, along with the role of the Psalter in contemporary discipleship.

### ***Part 1: Entering the Psalms***

Our initial discussion outlines a threefold approach for studying the Psalms: historical, literary, and theological. First, there is a discussion of the Psalms in their historical context. Here a basic sketch of the history of Israel is provided, along with a discussion of the place of the book of Psalms within the Hebrew Bible. Second, there is a discussion about what is distinctive about the Psalms as a work of literature. An overview of biblical poetry is provided, with an explanation of *parallelism* as a foundational poetic feature that we discover in the Psalms. Third, in terms of theology, there is a discussion about distinctive beliefs held by ancient Israelites that contemporary readers may be unaware of, and some of their basic assumptions about God and humanity for background when considering the Psalms.

### ***Part 2: Psalms in their Ancient Near Eastern Context***

Various ideas about the origins of the Israelite psalms are probed in the next section of our course. By comparing Hebrew compositions with the religious poetry of other nations, the reader can appreciate that the psalms did not arise in a vacuum but are part of a wider cultural network, and in a number of ways draw on a common fund of images for relating the human and divine spheres even while moving in distinctive directions. The Hebrew title for the book, *Tehillim* (or "Praises"), is associated with the idea of a musical instrument, and the Psalms have a longstanding tie with music and performance. Through readings of Psalm 29 and 104, it is suggested that certain psalms arose as responses to situations of public importance such an *ideological struggle* with a prevailing worldview from the surrounding nations. Moreover, through a study of Psalm 74 and the controversial Psalm 137, it is further suggested that a *crisis moment* in national history such as the trauma of the Babylonian exile could give rise to certain psalms, songs that were then preserved by subsequent generations.

**Part 3: The Variety of Psalms**

Within the collection of 150 psalms written over the course of a millennium, there is great diversity of material. Just as there are different kinds of songs nowadays (ballads, anthems, hymns, folk tunes) and assorted musical genres (classical, jazz, country, hip-hop) so there are numerous categories and styles of psalms. In this section of our course various genres of psalms are canvassed, including the most frequently attested: psalms of *lament* and psalms of the *temple*, as well as *royal*, *creation*, and psalms of *instruction*. Furthermore, Psalm 73 is given careful consideration, since it provides a compelling account of an individual's experience that begins with frustration: why do the wicked appear so healthy and prosperous, while the righteous languish and apparently are not rewarded for keeping their hearts pure? Such thoughts were tormenting the poet, but a turning-point occurs in the psalm when the poet enters *the sanctuary of God*, and in a powerful crescendo the poet experiences a revelation about the meaning of life and the final destiny of the unrighteous.

**Part 4: Israel's Story in the Psalms**

Throughout history, from the "Funeral Oration of Pericles" in the works of Thucydides to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, literary texts have been composed for specific occasions or as responses to a prevailing cultural situation or worldview. In earlier discussions we suggested that similar premises are behind some of the poetry in the book of Psalms, and that Israelite songwriters produced various compositions that invite the community to *reimagine* important events and to highlight the experience of a particular occasion, or perhaps to counter a prevailing ideology or belief system. An important genre is referred to as the *historical* psalms, where a sequence of episodes in Israel's national history are poetically represented. Nearly a dozen psalms might be classified as *historical* (or at least contain longer historical reflections or have the characteristics of the genre), and three examples are discussed: Psalms 114, 105, and 78.

**Part 5: Psalmic Collections**

Within the book of Psalms are a number of smaller groupings or sub-collections, such as the Korah psalms (42–49), the psalms of Asaph (73–83), and the so-called Egyptian Passover psalms (113–118). This section of our course is focused on two significant collections. First, the "songs of ascent" (Psalms 120–134) are a collection often thought have originated as pilgrimage music, performed every year by travelers on their way up to worship in Jerusalem. Because each of the fifteen songs begin with the heading *shir hama'aloth*—rendered as a song of "steps" or "going up"—the pilgrimage genre has a certain attractiveness, and would point to an earlier tradition in ancient Israel. In more recent days some scholars have argued for a later date and less connection to the temple or pilgrimage as such, and more metaphorical intents such as the *burdens* of human existence and the *journey of life*. Second, there are thirteen psalms with superscriptions that directly relate to events in the life of David, although they are scattered throughout the book of Psalms rather than appearing sequentially. Since David was considered the greatest king in Israelite history with the most extensively drawn portrait in the Hebrew Bible, we will briefly survey his life story and the position of King David in the book of Psalms. Moreover, three of these psalms in particular are explored: Psalm 59, associated with his flight from Saul; Psalm 51, associated with Nathan the prophet's confrontation after his adultery with Bathsheba; and Psalm 3, associated with the threat posed by his son Absalom's rebellion.

***Part 6: The Structure of the Book of Psalms***

Since a number of individual psalms and groupings have been analyzed in course, this next part turns to the final form of the collection and how it is organized as a book. There are three parts to this section of our course. First, the various superscriptions (apart from those that mention a particular event in David's life) are assessed, along with some explanation of how they developed over time and some guidelines for interpreting them. Second, the positioning of Psalms 1 & 2 at the outset of the collection is carefully considered, as these opening psalms are often referred to as *the gateway of the Psalter*. It will be observed that Psalm 1 is a meditation on the virtues of a righteous life contrasted with the instability and ephemeral nature of a life lived apart from God, while Psalm 2 articulates the dangers of other nations resisting a future ruler of international domain. Third, there are some questions raised about the five-book structure of the Psalms, and it is proposed that there is a larger metanarrative or overarching storyline that can be discerned in the final form of the text: can it be maintained that the structure of the book of Psalms generally corresponds to the history of Israel, from the reigns of David and Solomon through the murkiness of the divided kingdom, followed by the travail of exile and subsequent restoration to the land? Could it be further suggested that in the architecture of the book of Psalms there is a general movement from cries for help and dwelling on past mistakes to a more unfettered praise and joyful set of expectations for the future?

***Part 7: The Legacy of the Psalms***

The concluding section of this course turns to the enduring legacy of the book of Psalms, and has two aspects. First, the history of interpretation is surveyed, with a selection of major thinkers over the ages chosen for their influential contributions to the interpretation of the psalms and their lasting insights, such as Augustine, Rashi, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. Altogether, the reception history of the book of Psalms may help to explain why it ranks among the most translated and transcribed texts in world history. Second, we will conclude our discussions with some overall thoughts about the theology of the Psalter and the use of the Psalms in contemporary Christian life.

**ASSIGNMENTS*****Pre-Course Assignment:***

1. A five page single-spaced report on our course textbook (*Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*) due prior to the start of our course on Monday morning (**January 28, 2019**). This report will discuss the content of the textbook, and provide a summary of what the student has learned (**10%**).

***Post-Course Assignments:***

2. Creative Responses: *The Workshop* (**60%**). Before the end of our cumulative course work, together we will read through the entire book of Psalms and respond to a series of interactive questions (for example, "What is the Egyptian 'Hymn to the Aten' and how might it relate to Psalm 104?" or "To what degree is the history of Israel refracted in Psalm 23?") for each of the 150 psalms. The student will provide a written response of approximately 200-300 words for each question, and the completed workshop should be emailed to the professor as a WORD or PDF file not later than **March 29, 2019**.

3. Research and Reflection essay: (**30%**). This is a standard 1500 word paper, single-spaced in Chicago format to be emailed to the professor as a WORD or PDF file no later than **March 29, 2019**. Topics can include the psalms in their ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu, strategies for preaching

the Psalms in our contemporary world, the book of Psalms in the New Testament, the theology of the Psalter, the place of the Psalms in the early church or the Reformation era, or selected topics in the history of interpretation.

## **SEMINARY CALENDAR**

Students are expected to be aware of the policies that govern course work at Briercrest Seminary, all of which are published in the current Seminary Calendar:

<https://www.briercrestseminary.ca/academics/calendar/>.

### ***Attendance Policy***

Students are expected to attend 100% of each modular for which they register. If this is impossible, arrangements must be made with the course professor. A maximum of 1 full day of class can be foregone. Students should request to withdraw from the course or move the course to an audit if additional time is missed.

### ***Course Schedules***

Classes begin at 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning and run a minimum of 30 hours through the course of the week. The schedule is determined by the course professor. Students should check the syllabus for specifics. When the syllabus does not state class times, students are responsible to check with the professor prior to making travel plans.

### ***Assignment Submission***

All assignments must be submitted no later than eight weeks after the last day of class as stated in the syllabus. The correct due dates will be clearly noted in the syllabus and each faculty member will state in their syllabus how assignments should be submitted. Assignments submitted within a week after the due date will be accepted with a 10 per cent penalty. For additional information refer to the late assignment policy or the extension policy in the [academic calendar](#).

### ***Return of Graded Assignments***

Professors are expected to return graded assignments within six weeks of the due date. If they fail to do so, students may submit an inquiry to the [Seminary](#). If an extension is granted, the professor is no longer obligated to meet this deadline.

### ***Academic Honesty***

Students are accountable to perform each task according to principles of academic honesty. Please refer to pages 24-25 in the [academic calendar](#) for more information.

### ***Academic Accommodations***

Any student with a disability, injury, or illness who may need academic accommodations should discuss them with the course instructor after contacting the Student Success Centre in person (Room #215), by telephone (1-306-756-3230) or by email ([studentsuccesscentre@briercrest.ca](mailto:studentsuccesscentre@briercrest.ca)).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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