Reflections on the Psalms  by C. S. Lewis

Reflections on the Psalms was published on 1958, shortly after Till We Have Faces (1957). Lewis had actually stopped writing religious books for a number of years following the mediocre reception to Miracles (1947). In the interim, he wrote the Narnia series. His wife, Joy, and close friend Austin Farrer encouraged Lewis to write more religious works. Reflections on the Psalms was in response to their urging. However, from here on out, Lewis's religious works would be more devotional or theological in nature, rather than apologetics.

Lewis dedicated Reflections on the Psalms to Austin Farrer and his wife Katherine. Besides being a close friend of Lewis, Farrer was a renowned Anglican theologian, philosopher and author of several hundred articles, books and sermons. They became friends during the 1940s; Farrer was active in the Oxford Socratic Club, of which Lewis was president until 1954. The club provided a forum where Christians and non-Christians could debate the intellectual claims of Christianity.

Austin and Katherine Farrer were among the few of Lewis's Oxford set who befriended Joy. Both were present at Lewis's private civil marriage to Joy. Farrer also officiated at Joy's memorial service and Jack's funeral.

This is the only book Lewis wrote that concerns a specific book of the Bible. Is it any wonder he would choose the biblical book of poetry? Lewis's first published works were poems (e.g. Dymer, Spirits in Bondage). Until his early 30s, he aspired to be a poet.

Many thanks to Patricia Poret, a long-time member of the Chapel Hill C. S. Lewis Book Club, for her assistance in researching the notes and drafting questions for some of the chapters in this study guide.

Note: When Lewis gives a scripture reference in Reflections on the Psalms, the chapter number is in regular type followed by a comma. The verse number is in italics. If no book is included in the parentheses, Lewis is referencing the Psalms. However, these study guides shall utilize the more familiar American style of citation: Psalm 23:1 - meaning chapter 23 and verse 1. Similarly, this material will use American spelling, except in direct quotations.

You may notice deviations in the verse numbering between your Bible and the translation C. S. Lewis was using when he wrote Reflections on the Psalms. If the verses don't match up, look to the verse before or after the one referenced.
Reflections on the Psalms

Chapter 1 – Introductory

1. What are Lewis's disclaimers? What approach is he taking with this book?

2. Why must we remember that the Psalms are poems?

3. What is "parallelism"? Why did this literary device turn out to be fortuitous or an example of God's provision?

4. What practical purpose did Lewis find in having some biblical truths expressed as poetry? What incarnational aspect did Lewis imagine?

5. What reason does Lewis give for not writing an apologetic work?

Chapter 2 - "Judgement" in the Psalms
6. What mental images do most modern Christians have of the Day of Judgment? Lewis is surprised that the Jewish psalmists had a different view of judgment; they saw an occasion for rejoicing. Describe the differences. Why was judgment something to be longed for?

7. How does Lewis believe the Jewish picture of judgment can supplement the Christian picture? (Look at the standards against which our actions will be judged.)

8. The Jewish psalmist usually sees himself as the civil plaintiff. How does Lewis draw profit from these psalms by picturing himself as the civil defendant?

9. What distinction does Lewis make between being "in the right" and being "righteous"? Do you agree?

10. What do you think of Lewis's statement: "An exhortation to charity should not come as rider to a refusal of justice." (found in the next to last paragraph)? Have you seen this occur at school or work? What were the consequences? What message does it convey?

Notes:
Mares' nests: something thought at first to be an extraordinary discovery, only later proven to be a hoax
Judge Jeffreys (1648-89): partisan judge who presided over a series of trials in the aftermath of the Monmouth Rebellion (an attempt to overthrow James II). Two hundred defendants hanged and 800 were deported as indentured servants to British colonies.
Chapter 3 -- The Cursings

1. List some of the curses the author of Psalm 109 wishes would befall his enemy. Are you surprised to find these sentiments in the Bible? How do you feel about this Psalm and others like it?

2. What two admissions have to be made before delving into the imprecatory psalms?

3. What two good uses can we make of the imprecatory psalms?

4. What do you think of Lewis's theory that "those who are readiest to die for a cause may easily become those who are readiest to kill for it"?

5. When might the absence of anger be an alarming symptom?

6. What danger exists in superimposing "thus saith the Lord" to our own hatred or desire for vengeance?

7. What aspect of "the Divine voice" can be heard in the imprecatory psalms?

8. If you have access to a copy, read pages 133-39 of Philip Yancey's *The Bible Jesus Read*. The excerpt is titled "Problem Psalms." He discusses three of the explanations proffered for these psalms:

   (1) "The cursing psalms express an appropriate 'righteous anger' over evil."
   (2) "The cursing psalms express a spiritual immaturity corrected by the New Testament."
   (3) "The cursing psalms are best understood as prayers."

Which, if any, explanation resonates with you?
Chapter 4 -- Death in the Psalms

9. Do you agree or disagree with the case Lewis makes that the afterlife does not figure prominently in the Psalms?

10. Lewis argues that concern for an afterlife is not a religious subject. Why? Do you agree or disagree?

11. What danger might come from a premature focus upon heaven?

12. Lewis concludes that something other than peace and plenty in this world was the center focus of the Jewish faith. What leads him to this conclusion?

Notes:

Mr. Pilgrim (1904-1954): Edward Pilgrim was a toolmaker who purchased an adjacent tract of land in 1949 for £400 to use as a buffer around his home. Unbeknownst to him, recent legislation allowed local councils to purchase land at agricultural values, rather than the higher commercial or development values. The town council exercised its right to purchase the tract in 1952 for £65 and built a high-rise, which blocked Pilgrim’s natural light and eliminated his peace and quiet. In 1954, Pilgrim hung himself in a tool shed located on the lot. The press made his suicide a cause célèbre.

Committee of Public Safety (1793-95): operated as the de facto executive government of France during the violent Reign of Terror. The Committee was responsible for thousands of executions.

Witch of Endor: In 1 Samuel 28, a medium King Saul consulted for advice about an invading army. Resort to mediums was prohibited by the Mosaic law (Leviticus 19:31).

Sadducees: a priestly, aristocratic sect within the Jewish Sanhedrin that rejected the teaching of an afterlife, a resurrection, or the existence of angels and demons. Their doctrinal position adds to the irony of the question they posed to Jesus in Mark 12:18-27.
Chapter 5 - "The Fair Beauty of the Lord"

1. What differences did Lewis see between ancient Judaism and modern Christianity? Where did Lewis find the same delight in God that made David dance? (See 2 Samuel 6:14-23 for the account of David’s dance.)

2. What role did the Temple play in ancient Israel? What role did the synagogue play? How is a "parish church" the "descendant of both"?

3. According to Lewis, the ancient Jews did not separate the Temple rites from the vision of God (i.e. "beholding the fair beauty of the Lord"). "Life was one." What happens when the introduction of abstraction and analysis breaks down the old unity? Consider Psalm 40:6-8; Hosea 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:22.

4. What humorous example does Lewis give of "admirable poetry and admirable piety"?

5. Read Psalm 50 (esp. verses 7-15). What point does Lewis make about verse 12?

6. Which psalms express your delight and joy in God?
Chapter 6 - "Sweeter than Honey"

7. Read Psalm 19 (esp. verses 7-11. Note: The psalm is reprinted in Appendix I of the book.) How does the psalmist describe God’s law? What did Lewis find bewildering about this profuse delight over God’s law?

8. What potential dangers did Lewis see in "poring over the Law"?

9. What are some unique features of Psalm 119? How does it exemplify Lewis's comment: "The Order of the Divine mind, embodied in the Divine Law, is beautiful"?

10. Summarize Lewis's thoughts on the Law as truth. What lies at the heart of the Hebrew view that the Law is good?

11. Why might pagan alternatives be attractive to the ancient Hebrews? What is God’s Law like in comparison to the pagan alternatives? Is the contrast as strong today?

Notes:

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832): Scottish novelist and poet known for Ivanhoe, Rob Roy and Waverly. The quoted phrase, spoken by an old woman, comes from Old Mortality.

Jean Racine (1636-1699): French poet and playwright. In 1691, he wrote Athalie which critics consider the perfect example of French classical tragedy, based on the story in 2 Kings 11 about Queen Athaliah (daughter of Ahab and Jezebel) who murdered the royal princes upon the death of her son King Ahaziah and assumed the throne herself. This attempt to wipe out the Davidic line was foiled by her daughter Jehosheba, who hid one young prince, Joash, in the temple for six years.
Chapter 7 – Connivance

1. What is one danger of avoiding the company of people you consider evil?

--What curious aspect of human nature does Lewis identify when it comes to rascally newspapers and lying politicians?

--Do you think 21st century American society is too tolerant or intolerant of rascality?

2. Lewis distinguishes one subset of bad people, namely the poor and miserable, whose wickedness has not paid. How are we to treat them? What false motive does he caution against?

3. Describe the behavior Lewis dubs "band-wagoning." List some examples.

4. Lewis recommends avoiding, where possible, people who are "bullies, lascivious, cruel, dishonest," etc. Why?

5. List four possible responses Lewis gives to the question: "What is one to do?" Which one do you employ most often? Which one would you like to try?

6. Look up some of the references in Psalms regarding the tongue given at the end of the chapter. (Enough said.)
Chapter 8-Nature

7. What two factors determine the psalmists' approach to nature?

8. After examining the creation stories of several pagan religions, what does Lewis conclude? How does he use the analogy of a play to illustrate his point?

9. What effect does the "doctrine of Creation" have upon the relationship between nature and divinity? What does Lewis mean when he suggests that worshipping nature may actually silence her?

10. What does nature tell us about God's character?

11. What did Lewis find surprising about the Jews' gusto (or appreciation) toward nature? How does this attitude differ from our modern concept of kindness to animals?

12. Lewis concludes the chapter with a lengthy digression on an Egyptian nature poem. What do you think about his thesis that a certain kind of poetry goes with a certain kind of theology?

Notes:
- **Unco guid**: Scottish expression for people who are strict in morals and religion; comes from Robert Burns's poem "Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous."
- **Publican**: the occupying Roman government used local individuals to collect imperial taxes. Tax collectors got to set their own "handling fee." In Christ's time, publicans were hated by the Jewish people because of their abusive practices.
- **Vichy**: refers to the government of the unoccupied part of France from July 1940 to August 1944 under Marshal Pétain.
- **Emeth**: Hebrew word translated faithfulness, firmness, or truth. Also a noble enemy soldier in Lewis's *The Last Battle*, who goes to Aslan's country (i.e. heaven) despite his ignorant worship of Tash during his lifetime.
Chapter 9-A Word about Praising

1. What was the "stumbling block" Lewis experienced as he drew closer to belief in God? In what way did he find the praise Psalms troublesome? Have you ever had thoughts like this?

2. How does Lewis come to grips with the misconception that God has a "right" to be praised?

3. Ideally, what is supposed to happen when we worship God?

4. What does Lewis mean by his statement "praise almost seems to be inner health made audible?"

5. How does praise complete our enjoyment?

6. How and why are we to be "tuning our instruments" of praise? What are some of your experiences "digging channels in a waterless land"?

7. What does Lewis mean by "the flame does not ascend pure from the altar"? What still persists within us?

Chapter 10-Second Meanings
The whole of chapter 10 is devoted to the thesis that many writings both ancient and modern contain second meanings. Lewis begins far away from scripture, and even from Christianity, to relate instances in which something said or written took on a new significance in light of subsequent events.

8. Lewis distinguishes between various reasons why a past statement may take on a secondary meaning based on later events. What are the categories he identifies?

9. How does the example from Plato's *Republic* "touch the very same reality" as the Passion of Christ?

10. How do the anthropologists explain the various pagan myths about a dying and rising god?

11. How do the two Christian schools of thought explain the resemblance between the pagan myths and Christ? Which theory makes the most sense to you?

12. What is the "real connection between what Plato and myth-makers" meant and the truth Lewis refers to? Consider 1 Peter 1:10-12; Matthew 13:16-17.

Notes:

*Sibylline Books*: collection of oracles consulted by ancient Romans in times of crisis

Chapter 11-Scripture

1. Why did some people suspect Lewis of being a fundamentalist? How did Lewis differentiate his position from that of a fundamentalist?

2. What was Lewis's opinion on the book of Job? On the Genesis account of creation?

3. How does Lewis characterize God's guidance in the writing of Scripture? What does he think about the human writers' part in it?

4. Lewis suggests that some of us would prefer the Bible to be more like an encyclopedia. Why? Instead, God gave us what he thought best. What possible reasons does Lewis offer for the more elusive way God took?

5. Lewis draws a parallel between the Incarnation and the writing of Scripture. Human life becomes the vehicle of divine life. Literature becomes the vehicle of God's word. What is the danger of this "up-grading" of lower forms?

6. What was Jesus' approach to the second meanings in Scripture? List some of the examples Lewis gives.
Chapter 12-Second Meanings in the Psalms

7. What was controversial between the way Jesus interpreted the Psalms and the way the Jewish leaders interpreted them?

8. Lewis comments about viewing Scripture through the lens of your own generation. Do you agree/disagree? How might contemporary influences impact the way we interpret Scripture today?

9. What two things "attach" Psalm 110 to Christ? Both the writers of Psalm 110 and Hebrews compare Jesus to Melchizedek to show Jesus as both priest and king. These offices were kept separate in the nation Israel. Priests descended from the tribe of Levi; kings descended from the tribe of Judah (specifically David's line). How is Jesus both a priest and a king? (Hint: Jesus' first coming emphasized the priestly role. His second coming will focus on the kingly aspect.)

10. What connections exist between the sufferer in Psalm 22 and Jesus, the archetypal sufferer?

11. How is Christ, as the Son of Man, an archetype?

12. Look at Psalm 84:10, Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8 and Ecclesiastes 3:11. How is the passing of time an aching wound which eternity will cure?

Notes

Fundamentalism: A movement arising in the early 20th century which sought to shore up traditional Protestant Christianity and defend it militantly against the challenges of German higher criticism, Darwinism, and other perceived threats. Through the decades the term has evolved in meaning. During Lewis's time (1940s), fundamentalism's distinctive was the literal interpretation of the Bible.

John William Dunne (1875-1949): Irish aeronautical engineer who also wrote about the nature of time. After having a precognitive dream of a volcano eruption, Dunne posited that our perception of time as linear occurs only when conscious. When dreaming, past, present and future are simultaneous.

Additional Reading

(1) Letters of C. S. Lewis, dated Nov. 8, 1952 and May 7, 1959
(2) 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21.
(3) C. S. Lewis on Scripture, by Michael Christensen (1979)