

Grounded: in the Body in Time & Place, in Scripture

Chapter title Embodied Worship: The Psalms and the Senses

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Meet the author

Rev. Dr. Melinda Cousins is the Director of Ministries for Baptist Churches South Australia and teaches Biblical Studies at Tabor. She completed her PhD in 2016 on the Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) looking at ideas of theological interpretation, pilgrimage, and performance.

Chapter overview

Biblical studies has tended to engage with Scripture in predominantly intellectual ways. Certainly, the Scriptures seek to transform by renewing the mind, but they also do so by evoking emotion, inspiring the imagination, and engaging the body. This is noticeably demonstrated in the book of Psalms, which are grounded in concrete communal experience. These poems, songs, and prayers of the people of God invite us into their engagement with God and the world, calling for worship as response to God using every aspect of who we are.

There are at least seven sensory organs named in the Old Testament: eyes, ears, mouth, tongue, nose, hand/arm, and foot/leg. Examining the use of these in the Psalms invites reflection on embodied practices of worship: how we respond to God by paying attention to what we see, listening to his voice, speaking his words, savouring his goodness in taste and smell, participating in his work with our hands, and grounding our faith in our walking.

An example is given of a six-week sermon series on the Psalms and the Senses used in a contemporary Australian church, inviting the community to together practice worship in new, embodied, and grounded ways, using all these senses.

Study questions

Question 1

Do you tend to connect with God more through your mind, body, emotions, imagination, or relationships? Which of these do you find most challenging to consider?

Question 2

In what ways have you engaged with the Psalms? Have you considered singing, praying, hearing aloud, remembering, reciting, or enacting them?

Question 3

Why do you think the Psalms seek to generate emotions and evoke imagination? How do these help us worship?

Question 4

What do you think of the “seven senses” Yael Avrahami proposes are found in the Old Testament? Which of these surprises, challenges, or encourages you?

Question 5

Where is there nature, art, creativity, activity, humanity around you that you have not taken time to notice and really see? If you could spend an hour anywhere just paying attention to what your eyes take in, where would you go?

Question 6

How much noise is there in your life and what are you listening to? How do you hear God’s voice in the midst of it all?

Question 7

Have you ever thought about the use of your voice as a way you ‘make sense’ of the world? How could you practice letting God speak through your mouth?

Question 8

How might savouring what you smell and taste be an act of worship?

Question 9

Name some of the different things you do with your hands. How do they reflect God's work and your calling to be like Him?

Question 10

Where do you place your feet? In what ways are you physically connected to the place where God has grounded you?

Question 11

How could you or your church take time to include more of your sensory experience in your experience of worship?

Academic Questions

Question 1

In what ways has Biblical Studies benefited from and been limited by a focus on intellectual or 'head' knowledge?

Question 2

What is the place of the emotions, imagination, and body in engaging with the Scriptures?

Question 3

Do you agree with Avrahami's classification of seven senses in the Old Testament? Has she missed any? Do you see this reflected outside the Psalms?

Question 4

Are the references to sensory organs in the Psalms metaphorical or literal? What is the difference?