

Introducing the Psalms

“[The Psalms] might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book,”

Martin Luther, “Preface to the Psalter,” in *Works* (1960), 254.

“[The Psalms] are full of power and passion, horrendous misery and unrestrained jubilation, tender sensitivity and powerful hope. Anyone at all whose heart is open to new dimensions of human experience, anyone who loves good writing, anyone who wants a window into the bright lights and dark concerns of the human soul—anyone open to the beautiful expression of a larger vision of reality should react to these poems like someone who hasn’t had a good meal for a week or two. It’s all here,”

Tom Wright, *Finding God in the Psalms*, 2.

The Nature of the Psalms

- The Psalms speak for us
 - They express the full range of human emotions
 - The Psalms contain themes around praise, trust, thanksgiving, lament, pain, loss, wisdom, despair, protest, justice and much more
 - Despite the historical gap, the Psalms continue to resonate!
- The Psalms remind us that God is at work in our lives
 - God is our “rock,” “shield,” “fortress,” “help,” “shepherd,” “deliverer” and so on. He punishes our enemies (cf. Ps 52)
- The Psalms are key for Christian spirituality
 - The most cited OT book in the NT
 - The Psalms form prayer, language and songs/hymns
 - The Psalms help us access our “shadow” and “inner life”

*“[The Psalms are] an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror,” John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*.
Translated by James Anderson. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 1948–1949.*
 - The Psalms = “all the feels”

The Language of the Psalms

- Different communities titled this collection in different ways
- The earliest title for the Psalms came from the Hebrew *tēhillîm* (“praises”)
 - English terms “Psalm”/“Psalter” from the Greek (*psalmoi/psaltērion*) via the Hebrew term *mizmōr* (“song”)
 - *Psalmoi* = “Songs Sung to a Stringed Instrument”

- *Psaltērion* = A stringed instrument
- Psalm 72: “This [Psalm] concludes the *prayers* (*tepillôt*) of David son of Jesse”
- Two names preserved in Hebrew tradition, “prayers” (*tepillôt*) and “songs of praise” (*tēhillîm*) = two types of psalms (prayers/laments and praise)? (James Limburg)

Origin and Purpose

- We do not know why/how the Psalms came into being
 - Between 600BCE–200BCE (during and after the Babylonian exile)
 - About a 1000 years of composition, transmission, collection and arrangement, and contain some of the oldest and newest writings in the OT
- Collection of songs = Spiritual formation
- 150 Psalms?

Psalms as History?

- The history of the Psalms is limited (poetry, not history)
 - E.g. “A prayer of an afflicted person who has grown weak and pours out a lament before the Lord” (Ps 120)
 - 19th century, scholars attempted to figure out the history (it failed)
- *The Psalms conceal their origins. It is thus an odd fact that study of the Psalms in both the premodern and modern periods paid considerable attention to their authorship and historical background* (Goldingay, *Psalms* 1, 25)
- The Psalms of David?
 - Superscripts and postscripts
 - David wrote 4050 psalms and songs (11Q5 XXVII 2-11)?!
 - NT links Psalms to David – Psalm 2 (Acts 4:24–28); 16 (Acts 2:25–32); 32 (Rom 4:6–8); 69, 109 (Acts 1:15–20; Rom. 11:9–10); 95 (Heb 4:7); and 110 (e.g., Mark 12:35–37; Acts 2:33–35)
 - “David wrote the Book of Praises” (*b. Baba Batra* 14b–15a)
 - “Of David”? (*mizmôr lēdāwid*)
 - *mizmôr* [Song/Psalms]
 - *lē* [to/belonging to/for/on behalf of/about]
 - *dāwid* [David]
 - Jesus calls them David’s (accommodation)
 - Female authors? Psalm-like praises elsewhere (Exod 15; Jud 5; 1 Sam 2)
 - Cf. Psalms to older Middle Eastern/Babylonian literature

Structure

- Book 1 (1–41), Book 2 (42–72), Book 3 (73–89), Book 4 (90–106), Book 5 (107–150)
- Collections:
 - “Davidic” Collections (Psalms 3–41; 51–72; 138–145)
 - Korahite Collections (42–49; 84–85; 87–88)
 - Elohistic Collections (42–83)
 - Asaphite Collections (73–83)
 - Song of Ascents (120–134)

The Poetry of the Psalms

- Genre = Poetry (for a detailed overview see Wilson, *Psalms* 1, 31–57)
 - But not Western, modern, poetry (see “Bay Psalm Book”)
 - The Psalms rhythm in thought, not language
 - Some universal and cross-cultural aspects of poetry exist (metaphor, simile, personification, onomatopoeia)
- We need poetry
- Christian Mystics reacted against 12th Century scholasticism
 - Thomas à Kempis; Catherine of Siena; Richard Rolle; Julian of Norwich; *Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Interior Castle* (Teresa of Avila), etc.
 - Contemporary Christian Poets: Christina Rossetti, John Donne, T.S. Elliot, George Herbert, Alfred Lord Tennyson; Malcolm Guite etc.

Parallelism

- The most dominant feature of Psalm language is parallelism, or “stereophonic complementariness” (if you want to sound fancy)
- Parallelism does not just mean repetition of an idea, but often means going beyond an idea and extending it
- E.g. Ps 19:1–6
 - Colas, Biocolons and Tricolons
- There are different forms of Hebrew parallelism (synonymous/affirming, antithetical/opposing, synthetic, climactic, emblematic, alternate, chiasmic)
 - Chiasms
 - E.g. Ps 90:1–2

Other Poetic Devices

- Merism
- Inclusio
- Acrostic/Alphabetical Psalms (e.g. Ps 119)

Imagery and Metaphor

- Metaphors and imagery are able to transcend culture and our personal experience
- E.g. Ps 23
- We don’t just read the Psalms, they read us

Types of Psalms

- Hermann Gunkel
- The Psalms aren’t “private” but corporate
 - Headings/superscripts
 - “For the director of music. With stringed instruments” Ps 4:1 [“Capo on fifth fret”]
 - The Psalms became private following the Babylonian Exile (586BC), then corporate again with Second Temple (516BC), but Temple destroyed (AD70), so the Psalms remain both corporate and individually read

- “[The Psalms became] Scripture to be studied and meditated upon, both as models for personal prayer and as sources of divine guidance for daily living, took place,” (Wilson, *Psalms*, 30)
- Hermann Gunkel’s *five* types:
 - Hymns
 - Laments (Communal and Individual) Psalms
 - Thanksgiving Psalms
 - Royal Psalms
 - Wisdom Psalms
- But really three types:
 - 1. Praise (what God is like) (30%?)
 - 2. Thanksgiving (What God has done) (20%?)
 - 3. Lament (What God isn’t doing) (50%?)
- 1. Praise psalms (what God is like): E.g. Pss 8; 29; 33; 146–150
 - Praise psalms encourage us to praise God, by listing why God is praiseworthy and what he is like! They focus on God as the creator and sustainer of all of creation
 - “Good vibes” only
- 2. Thanksgiving/Testimony Psalms (what God has done): E.g. Pss 18; 21; 30; 32; 34; 41; 66; 73; 92; 103; 104; 107; 116; 118; 120; 124; 136; 138
 - Unlike praise psalms, thanksgivings focus on *what God has done* for his people
 - Thanksgiving psalms are the in-between space, between praise and lament
- 3. Laments (what God isn’t doing): E.g. Ps 13; 22; 44; 60; 74, 79; 80; 88; 130
 - Laments (or prayer Psalms) make up the majority of the Psalms
 - They appeal to God and seek deliverance from trouble/distress/suffering etc.
 - E.g. Psalm 88
 - These laments are protests; God, do something!
 - A common structure:
 - 1. “God where are you, please listen to us”
 - 2. “Please deliver us [... because you’re amazing]”
 - 3. “Oh and punish those at fault too”

Praise and Lament

- How do we embrace and live the lament life, today?
- Claus Westermann and the Holocaust
 - The Christian life is a matter of “praise” and “lament”
 - Do our prayers clash with the Psalms?
 - “Please” and “thank you,” not much protest or complaining
 - Prayer/Protest Psalms and Christians today
 - Do we struggle with pain and the reality of lament Psalms?

- Jesus draws on them (Psalm 6/42 in Gethsemane; Psalm 22 on the cross; Paul too, Psalm 42, Rom 8:36)
- Suffering, illness and pain in the Church today
- God is encountered in lament; suffering is in the now *and* the not yet

Anger

- Can we pray angry prayers?
 - Having anger, and hatred, are part of what it means to be human, and to be like God
 - Love and compassion should be our default, but like God, we can be provoked to anger, and our love can be wounded
 - The most famous? Ps 137:8-9
 - How do we wrestle with these Psalms when Jesus tells us to love our enemies? (Peter and Paul quote anger Psalms; Acts 1:16, 20; Rom 11:9–10)
 - We should express our anger and not deny it
 - Leave retribution and punishment to God

Other Psalms

- Penitential Psalms?
 - Christians tradition say seven “penitential/repentance Psalms” (Pss 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), but likely only two (33, 51)
- Royal Psalms: E.g. Pss 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132
 - Focus on the Israelite Kings
- Liturgical/cultic Psalms: E.g. Pss 15; 66:13–15
- *Yahweh malak* (the LORD reigns) Psalms: E.g. Pss 93, 97, 99
- Wisdom Psalms (deriving from Wisdom circles in Israel): E.g. Pss 1, 37, 49
- So, there are types of Psalms, but they aren’t neatly structured. They overlap and are messy (like life)
- Every Psalm is a praise Psalm!

“The Psalms make it possible to say things that are otherwise unsayable. In church, they have the capacity to free us to talk about things that we cannot talk about anywhere else,” (Goldingay Psalms 1, 22–23)

Further questions for reflection:

1. How do you personally resonate with the variety of emotions expressed in the Psalms?
2. Do you find certain types of Psalms easier or more challenging to connect with?
3. What role does lamentation play in our relationship with God?
4. How can embracing lament enhance our spiritual journey?
5. In what ways do you think the poetic nature of the Psalms contributes to their enduring relevance and impact across different cultures and time periods?

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