

Psalms and the Church

Scotty Williams

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Survey of the book of Psalms

Most readers of the Bible equate the book of Psalms to David, and rightfully so, because he constitutes nearly fifty percent (73) of the Psalms. But many other authors contributed to the writings of Psalms, such as Asaph (12), the Sons of Korah (11), Solomon and Moses (2), Heman and Ethen (2), and another forty-nine are just anonymous. Originally, the Psalms, or “praise songs”, were written for Jewish choirs to sing in the temple (2 Sam. 23:1-2; 1 Kings 4:32; 1 Chron. 15:16-22; 16:4-7; 25:1-8; 2 Chron. 29:25-26; 25:15; Eza 2:41; Neh. 11:22-23). During the period after Israel’s exile to Babylon, biblical editors compiled and arranged 150 poems that spanned several centuries throughout Israel’s history into a unified scroll with a very timely and important message. It is necessary to study the book of Psalm’s overall organization to better understand its main themes. In turn, this will help reveal an internal organization of the beautiful and diverse structures found in each individual psalm.

The book of Psalms is comprised of an introduction, five main sections, and a postlude. The introduction, which will be analyzed shortly, introduces the books overall themes. The bulk of the Psalms further advance these themes through five sections. The five sections of Psalms are derived from similar closing doxologies, “May the Lord God of Israel be blessed forever, amen and amen” (Ps. 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:51; 106:48). The postlude is made up of the last five chapters of the book known as the “praise God” psalms. Each of these chapter begin with *hallû yâ* (hallelujah) and are saturated with praise songs to Yahweh. They bring the book of Psalms to a hopeful conclusion.

Taking a step back and surveying the Hebrew Bible will give us a better grasp of the introduction and overall theme of the book. The Hebrew Bible is arranged into three parts- *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*- with the book of Psalms opening the *Ketuvim*. The three-part

shape of the Hebrew Bible is not a simple, random arrangement. Rather, its editorial seams of the three sections reveal an intentional design that masterfully reflects God's plan that was meant to be revealed, protected, and preserved from generation to generation.

The first seam is found in the last words of the Torah and the last words of the Nevi'im. Deuteronomy 34:10-12 anticipates the coming of a greater than Moses-like prophet who will call the people back to the Torah. Malachi 4:4-6 awaits the coming of an Elijah-like figure who will restore the hearts of Israel and herald the arrival the messianic kingdom. The second seam is identified in the beginning lines of the Nevi'im and the beginning lines of the Ketuvim. Joshua 1:1-9 is about God's appointed leader, Joshua, who must meditate on the Torah, day and night to find success in leading the people into the promised land. Psalms 1 depicts those who meditate on the Torah, day and night, as the righteous ones who will be vindicated in the final judgment.

Two prominent themes of the book of Psalms are unveiled through these intentionally crafted seams of the Hebrew Bible: the importance of Torah for the life of God's people and an awaited messianic king to rule the nations and overcome evil once and for all. They are meant to convey to the reader that the Torah is not only the lens through which the Nevi'im and the Ketuvim are to be read but also the lens through which the Nevi'im and the Ketuvim were consciously composed.¹ The introduction poems in the book of Psalms wonderfully capture this motif and echoes the masterful design of the Hebrew Bible. As previously mentioned, Psalms 1 blesses the one who

¹ Bible Project, "Guide to the Book of Psalms," <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-psalms/>.

meditates on the Torah. Psalms 2 reflects on God's promise to king David about a messianic king who will bring God's kingdom blessing to all who take refuge in him.

The first section of Palms, Psalms 3-41, is mostly related to David and is written in a five-part poetic structure (Figure 1). The five-part symmetric configuration allows the biblical compiler to emphasize particular ideas and themes through matched repetition in order to highlight the main point by placing it in the central position of the symmetry.² The center of first section, Psalms 19, focuses on the praise and high esteem given to Torah. It reads, "The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous" (Ps. 19:7-9).

Figure 1

- a. Call to covenant faithfulness (Psalms 15)**
- b. Davids past deliverance and elevation to king (Psalms 16-18)**
- c. Center: Praise of Torah (Psalms 19)**
- b. David of past has become a symbol for David of the future, that is, a messianic king who will call on the name of God and establish a kingdom (Psalms 20-23)**
- a. Call to covenant faithfulness (Psalms 24)**

The second section, Psalms 42-72, is mostly ascribed to David and the sons of Korah. The biblical composers ordered the second section into a parallel structure that serves to underscore the important themes they wanted to convey (Figure 2). The second sections' themes seem to integrate into the overall themes of the book of Psalms.³

Figure 2

- a. Hope for a future return to the temple in Zion. Associated to God dwelling with them and restoring His people (Psalms 42-43)**

² David A Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament : A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2005), 178.

³ Ibid., 184.

b. Future reign of Messianic King who will bring about fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and bless all nations (Psalms 72)

Section three, Psalms 73-89, is a smaller section that is mostly related to Asaph and the sons of Korah, and contains seventeen poems recognized as communal prayers. Psalms 89 is a good synopsis of the section's theme as it reflects on the promise of a messianic king in light of Israel's exile to Babylon. In this section, King David's downfall serves as an archetype of Israel's rebellion.⁴ Section four, Psalms 90-106, functions as a response to Israel's state and also known as the prayers of the community. In Psalms 90, the author reflects on Moses calling on the name of God to have mercy on Israel through the wilderness. The author is calling Israel to take the same posture as their ancestors as they find themselves in a similar situation, wandering outside the promised land. Psalms 93-99 are then meant to remind the reader that even though they are outside their promised land, amidst chaos, their hope must remain in the God of Israel.

Section five, Psalms 107-145, is the last big section and ties together all the main themes explored in the introduction and throughout the book (Figure 3). It also contains the longest poem in the book, Psalms 119. This psalm is an acrostic psalm, meaning, it has been arranged according to the order of the Hebrew alphabet with each successive line beginning with appropriate letter of the alphabet. Psalms 119 has 176 verses arranged in twenty-two stanzas (corresponding to the twenty-two letter of the Hebrew alphabet) of eight verses each, with all eight verses in each stanza beginning with the appropriate letter of the alphabet.⁵

Figure 3

- a. God will bring the messianic king to defeat evil (Psalm 107-11)**
- b. "The Hallel" (Psalms 113-118)**
- a. Concludes about coming of the Messianic Kingdom (Psalms 118)**
- c. Explores the wonderful gift of Torah (Psalms 119)**
- b. "The songs of Accents" (Psalms 120-136)**

⁴ Guide to the Book of Psalms.

⁵ David A Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament : A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2005), 186.

a. Concludes about coming of the Messianic Kingdom (Psalms 132)

The postlude consists of the final five poems in the book of Psalms. It is known as the Hallelujah poems because each poem begins with “Praise Yahweh”. The main theme of the postlude, which nestles perfectly within one of the main theme throughout the book of Psalms, is found in the center poem, Psalms 148. The author writes, “God has raised up a horn for his people” (Ps. 148:14). The author is creating beautiful imagery that is lost on modern day, western readers. First, the author is referring to an ancient practice in battle where the victor would cut the head of their enemy and lift it up as a sign of victory. Simultaneously, the author hyperlinking to Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2 and an earlier psalm, Psalm 132:17. All of this serves as a symbol for the author’s main point- to remind Israel that their hope must be forward looking to the day God will send a messianic king who will reign vicious over evil.

There are two main types of poems in the book of Psalms- praise and lament poems. Praise poems proclaim praise, joy, thanks and celebration. They draw attention to what is good in the world, retelling of God’s redeeming story. Lament poems express pain, confusion, and anger. They are a way to draw attention to what is wrong in the world and ask God to do something about it. Lament poems show the reader that lament is an appropriate response to the evils in the world. The emotions expressed in the Psalms run the full gamut, from ecstatic joy and contentment to anger, loneliness, fear and despair. Old Testament Theologian, David Dorsey comments, “the Psalms reflect a God who hears the prayers of individuals in whatever circumstances they find themselves in. The Psalmists understood God to be sympathetic to the plight of the helpless, a protector of the troubled, a companion to the lonely, and a forgiver of the repentant sinner.”⁶ Having both praise and lament poems alongside each other uncovers the

⁶ Ibid., 186.

tension of prayer that followers of Yahweh must all wrestle with- holding out hope in the King amid death and destruction.

As mentioned through this paper, the role of Torah and the wisdom of obeying it is a chief theme of the Psalms. As Psalms 1 alludes to, the wisdom and beauty of the Torah is so profound that continuous meditation upon it turns humans into sources of vitality like the tree of life itself. Another major theme packed throughout the Psalms is the anticipation of a messianic, Davidic king who will defeat evil, redeem the world and establish his reign and kingdom forever.

A more subtle theme in the book Psalms is the theme of the temple. For any Israelite reading Psalms 1, when they read about a tree, streams of water, fruit, and God's instruction in the same line, their thoughts would immediately turn to Genesis 2 and the Eden story. Theologically, the author of Psalms 1 profoundly declares that there is something so powerful about God's instruction that no matter where you are there in the world, there is the possibility to experience Eden, God's garden temple, His presence. The prayers of the authors become the prayer for the exiled Israelites as they reflect over and compile the Psalms into a collection. Even though Israel's temple was destroyed, the Psalms became Israelites way to meet with God. While reflecting on phenomena of the Psalms as symbol of God's temple (God's presence), C.S. Lewis writes "It is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men. It is not of course the only way. But for many people at many times the 'fair beauty of the Lord' is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together. Even in Judaism the essence of the sacrifice was not really that men gave bulls and goats to God, but that by their so doing God gave Himself to men."⁷ By retelling the story of God's redemptive plan through the Israelite nation the author is inviting the reader into a literary temple.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*. (S.L.: William Collins, 2020), 90.

Survey from Jesus to Present of the Use of Psalms with an Application for Today

The Psalms have been foundational to the imagination and theological formation of the Jewish nation and Jesus revolution. In there book, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, theologians D.A. Carson and G.K. Beale exposted over 1,500 references of the Psalms in New Testament writings.⁸ While this paper does not permit the time nor space to cover the wide range of the early church's uses of the Psalms, it is important to survey some early uses that have had significant impact on followers of Jesus through the ages.

Paul closes his letter to the home churches in Rome spurring them to share each other's burdens (Rom.15:1-4). He then prayers for endurance and encouragement as they serve each other and grow in oneness in this way (Rom. 15:5-6). Through growing in oneness, they were to accept each other just as Christ became the suffering servant and fulfilled the promise of the patriarchs by redeeming the gentiles back into His family (Rom. 15:7-11, Ps. 117:1). Paul draws from the Psalms to prove his claim that the gentiles had become accepted, redeemed, and grafted into the blessings promised to Abraham. Paul and the early apostles thought the way of Jesus that welcomed all nations to His banquet table was so significance, they dedicated their lives to sharing it to the Gentile world. This is the most consequential thing in my life because I am a non-Israelite, a Gentile, who follows Israel's Messiah and, therefore, have been grafted into His family. The story of the God of an Ancient Near Middle Eastern nation has now become my story. Their devotions, liturgies, passions, and more have become my own because I am an heir in the family. Praise be to God!

In Mark 1, the author tells the reader that the good news of Jesus, the Son of God, was the arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:1, 14). By calling Jesus the Son of God, Mark activates a

⁸ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic ; Nottingham, England, 2007).

hyperlink to Psalms 2:2-7. Psalms 2 poetically expresses how the rebellion of mankind seeks to destroy and overthrow God and His creation, but God has an anointed one, a King, the Son of God, who will overthrow these evils and establish His kingdom. Mark's colossal claim is that Jesus is this "Son of God" from Psalms 2 that has brought a messianic kingdom and reality to those all who believe. Sadly today, the true gospel of Jesus (the arrival of the King and His kingdom) has been overshadowed by a much simpler, self-serving gospel that focuses on going to heaven when someone dies. A "get out of hell free card", as I call it, is a very self-focused story that completely misses the entire purpose for God himself putting on flesh, becoming the suffering servant, and establishing His eternal Kingdom right here, right now. The true presentation of the gospel is so powerful that if every follower of Jesus lived as if it had become their life, families, workplaces, and cities might actually look more like God's kingdom come. I think it is vital how we teach our children, new followers of Jesus, and the lost sheep of this world the good news of Jesus and his reign. While a self-serving gospel may seem like an easy fix, it does not and never will have the power and authority that followers of Jesus are meant to proclaim to the world. May we walk in His truth as we live out the great commission.

The most renowned Psalm that has shaped the trajectory of God's story for Jesus, the early church, and us today is Jesus' use of Psalms 22 captured by all gospel writers in their passion narratives. The Psalm opens with the agony, cry and despair of David on the verge of death as his enemies enclose him. The poem then shifts to the praise, honor and declaration of God's mighty name. The transition comes through a phrase of repeated words, "Do not be far from me." that are meant to be the focus of the poem. Similarly, while Jesus breathed His last breathes on a cross, he cried out "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?")" (Ps. 22:1). The gospel writers offer significant revelation to the meaning of

Jesus' death in light of their incorporation of Psalms 22. In fact, they portray Jesus' sacrifice as the fullest expression of one whose suffering communicates not divine punishment, but rather, oneness with God. Psalms 22 anticipates Jesus' proclamation and embodiment of a communion with God that even death itself cannot destroy.⁹ As a person living in a modern, western, innocent-guilt cultural, it is far too easy to fixate our attention to a one-dimension, Penal substitution atonement theory and theology of Jesus' death, that we can miss the much more prevalent fear-power, honor-shame cultural perspective of Jesus death that is surely on the biblical authors mind.¹⁰ Just to clarify, I do not believe the penial substitution theory is incorrect, just limited in scope, especially in the context of an Ancient Near Eastern. Practically, I believe a cross-cultural experience when reading the Bible is vital to understanding the biblical authors on their own terms, instead projecting our own cultural understanding and biases onto the Bible.

In conclusion, the book of Psalms has served as prayer book over millennia for God's people as they remain faithful to the Torah and await the promised Messianic King. The literary design of Psalms claims a very intentional compilation that masterfully captured the state of Israel and the hope they held on to, while at the same time, marvelously capturing our hearts, on this side of the cross, as we hold on to the hope of new heaven and new earth. Theologically, the book of Psalms demonstrates how the Bible was designed as a collection where each part was crafted to anticipate and foreshadow themes and ideas that are developed later in the story, and how later stories are designed to imitate and recall themes and ideas from earlier in the text.¹¹ Whether it is Jesus' death on a cross, Augustine or Luther developing timely doctrine, a family

⁹ Kevin J Vanhoozer et al., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: Spck ; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005).

¹⁰ Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel : Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Timē Press, 2017).

¹¹ Guide to the Book of Psalms.

bedtime prayer, a wife lamenting the brokenness of her marriage, or a father gleaming the birth of his son, the Psalms have shaped the landscape of prayer, Christian theology and provide Christ followers an emotionally appropriate category to handle the tension of hope amidst evil.

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