

Psalms, II

Let us begin now to talk about the Psalms, the Psalter, and perhaps a good way to begin is with these reviewers' comments. Martin Luther, to begin with, says, "The Psalter is the favorite book of all the saints for in the Psalter, the true believer, whatever his circumstances, may find psalms and words which are appropriate to the circumstances to which he finds himself and meet his needs as adequately as if they were composed exclusively for his sake and in such a way that he himself could not improve on them nor could find or desire any better psalms or words." Indeed, as Luther goes on to point out, "If you get hold of the Psalter, you will have in your possession a fine, clear, pure mirror which will show you what Christianity really is. You will find yourself in it and know yourself and God Himself, and all His creatures." I think the riches of Psalms and the wisdom literature are extremely pertinent to counseling. After all, what is counseling if not an attempt to see into the soul of a person in such a way as to help that person or to see that person find help? And the psalms provide that—a fine, clear, pure mirror.

John Calvin often referred to Psalms as "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul." In the preface to his commentary on Psalms Calvin explained:

There is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. The Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are often agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us, but here the prophets themselves seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God and laying open all their innermost thoughts and affections call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject and of the many vices with which we abound may remain concealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage when all lurking places are discovered and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most painful infection, hypocrisy. In short, as calling upon God is one of the principle means of securing our safety and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us as in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in the Psalms, it follows that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them will be the knowledge of his most important part of celestial doctrine. Genuine and earnest prayer proceeds first from a sense of our need and next from faith in the promises of God. It is by perusing these inspired compositions that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure. In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God is taught us in this book.

Here I think Calvin says much that we need to hear about the Psalter.

Lest it be thought that the testimonies of Luther and Calvin are simply antiquated notions about the Psalter, I have purposely chosen a man by the name of Arthur Weiser who is a liberal, German, 20th century, Old Testament scholar. I have read a variety of his works, and I was pleased to run across this quotation from him. He emphasizes not only the public, but the private use of the Psalter. He says, "Apart from its use in public worship, it serves as a means of individual edification, as the foundation of family worship, as a book of comfort, as a book of prayers, and as a guide to God in times of joy and affliction." I think sometimes we tend to forget that those who may disagree with us and whom we may regard as misdirected theologically may nevertheless still have that longing for God. Rather than avoid, anathematize, or simply criticize them, we should go to them with open hearts and open minds willing to share what God has done for us. We did not do it for Him, but He did it for us.

Brevard Childs, who teaches at Yale University, also has some good things to say. He begins by saying, “With all due respect to Gunkel”—who has sort of set the stage for much of what goes on in Psalms studies—“the truly great expositors for probing the theological heart of the Psalms or the Psalter remain: Augustine, Kimchi,”—a medieval rabbinic commentator—“Luther, Calvin, the long-forgotten puritans buried in Spurgeon’s treasury [...]” It is interesting to hear this from the man who is a very prominent Old Testament scholar at Yale: “Go back to Calvin, Luther, and Spurgeon’s treasury.” This is a very refreshing thing to hear from him.

The Psalms confront and challenge us and provide an opportunity to see ourselves as we are. They not only show us our maladies, which often is what psychology does best, but they also lead us to the One who can heal us, which sometimes psychology is not able to do. “Our world today needs to hear testimony from people who have plumbed the depth of human experience, but who have also learned to draw upon the infinite resources of the Good Shepherd and the gracious host.”

The Hebrew title of Psalms is *tehilim*, which means simply “praises.” *Tehilim*, in fact, is related to the same word from which we get *hallelujah*. Hallelujah means “Praise the Lord.” Thus these are praises or perhaps songs of praises. We do not know how far back this Hebrew title goes. It goes back at least to 40 AD when Philo referred to the Psalter as *hymnoi*, “hymns,” or “songs of praise.” The word occurs a number of times in various psalms, but it does not occur once in the psalm titles. So the Hebrew title is “praises” or “songs of praises.” The English titles for the book are “Psalms” or sometimes “the Psalter.” Both of these reflect Greek titles, but they probably found their way into English via the Latin vulgate, the Latin having transliterated the Greek terms. The Greek title, *psalmoi* or *psalterion*, two Greek words, Psalms and Psalter, both come from the Greek word *psalo* which means “to pluck” or “to twang.” So it is clear that the name is derived from a noun that denoted a stringed instrument which is plucked or twanged. This eventually came, by transfer, to mean a song or a collection of songs. Thus the title, Psalms or the Psalter, means a collection of psalms or songs. None of the titles we use, I think, fully does justice to the book, because there are more than songs here. There are not simply praises. There are prayers, laments and wisdom psalms, as well as didactic portions. The book is a rich library of compositions that is difficult to describe with one title.

Is it proper to assume that many of the psalms, near the time of their composition, were accompanied by musical instruments? Yes, and some of the psalms talk about praising the Lord with an instrument. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord” means not simply the human voice but also instrumentation. However, we should not always assume that a psalm was accompanied by a musical instrument. Some could have arisen more as prayers that were prayed in the service or even in private.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the idea among many commentators on the Bible was that most of the psalms were exilic or post-exilic, coming after the southern kingdom of Israel was deported into Babylon. Most people have now moved away from that opinion, and I think the consensus now would be that most of the psalms are pre-exilic. And if you take seriously the association of David with the psalms and David’s reputation as the sweet psalmist of Israel, then many of them would have come from his time. And depending on what you make of the superscriptions, we have one that is ascribed to or associated with Moses, so that one could go back to the time of Moses. What is the significance of this? There was a time when people thought the psalms were all from a late period, and so they despaired of learning much from the psalms about the true religion and the piety of Israel prior to the exile. Whereas now, this move back to an earlier dating has brought about a renewed appreciation of the significance of the Psalter and of the psalms for understanding the religion and the spiritual life of Israel during the time of David and the monarchy. Ron Clements observes that the Psalms are now seen to stand in a

remarkably central position in the Old Testament and to provide an essential backcloth against which other religious developments can be viewed. If you really want to get at the heart of true belief in God you can see it in the psalms. You can hear the expressions of those who truly believed.

Let us move on to classification schemes. There have been various attempts to group the psalms together in terms of some common feature or features relating to them, whether it is their origin, association of the psalms with David or some other author, their subject matter, their form, or their function. The superscriptions, the titles of the psalms, are a part of the Hebrew text of these psalms. They are not in small type or italics in the Hebrew text. They were written just like everything else, and they even have a verse number in the Hebrew text. Not every psalm has a superscription, a title. The ones that do not are called “orphan psalms.” Many of the psalms are associated with David, particularly in the early portion of the Psalter. The majority of the first book is Davidic psalms. Psalm 42, which begins book two, is written by the sons of Korah, followed by some Davidic Psalms, then the psalm of Asaph, followed by more Davidic Psalms. At the beginning of book three there are many psalms of Asaph, some by the sons of Korah, and a few more Davidic psalms. Toward the end of the Psalter, beginning in Psalm 120, there are songs of ascent, which are sometimes called pilgrim psalms, and a few more Davidic psalms are threaded throughout the Psalter, although most of his are in the earlier portions, and some orphan psalms. The last five psalms are orphan psalms, which are also called Hallelujah or *Hallel* Psalms. So we have this collection before us of 150 psalms. We need to make some sense of it and get a handle on it. One way would be to group the psalms as the Davidic Psalms, the Psalms written by the sons of Korah, the Psalms written by Asaph or his descendents, etc. That is what some have done. Many of these schemes for organizing and understanding the psalms, which I will describe, are operating on different levels or looking at the Psalter from different angles and so there is no reason to assume that they are mutually exclusive. All of them can work. We can group and analyze the Psalter in a number of different ways.

It is interesting to note that the Psalter is divided into five books. This is somewhat of a mystery to those who study the Psalms. They are not sure why it is divided into five books. It does appear that the Psalter was built up over time, like a cathedral. In other words, it was not constructed all in one decade or even in one century. After all, we have a psalm associated with Moses and another psalm that is clearly post-exilic. There was a span of maybe a thousand years over which the various psalms in the Psalter were composed. Most cathedrals had a portion built one century and then a century later something else was added, and then maybe a century later another portion was added. And there is sort of a beautiful unity to the cathedral even though you can see the diversity and the fact that things were added over time. Well, the same is true of the Psalter. There is much study being done on this very interesting question, and I think that is something we will be learning more about in the future.

The five books are distinguished this way: book one is Psalms 1-41, book two is Psalms 42-72, book three is Psalms 73-89, book four is Psalms 90-106, and book five is Psalms 107-150. How do we know about these divisions? There is nothing in the Hebrew text that says, “Book one.” The way we know about the divisions is that each of these books ends with a doxology and the word, “Amen,” except for the last psalm, which ends the entire book. Thus it is the doxological conclusion that suggests that these divisions were known and were a part of the construction of the Psalter. Now, some have generalized about the nature of these five books. For instance, a commentator named Kirkpatrick says, “Book one tends to be personal, books two and three tend to be national, and books four and five tend to be liturgical, concerned with regular corporate praise of God.” Those are generalizations, but I think it is useful to understand. A more recent commentator, Mays, who has written a Psalms commentary in the Interpretation series, says that “the first [four books] of the Psalter are concerned more with prayer. In

the last book, you have more praises.” For an overview, that kind of information can be helpful. But that is not the only way to group the psalms. This way of grouping is according to the superscriptions.

Another way of grouping the psalms is to classify them according to theme, content, or referent. This is a very popular way of categorizing the Psalms, and it can be quite useful. S.R. Driver in his introduction to the literature of the Old Testament said: “In the Psalter we have meditations on different aspects of God’s providence as manifested in creation or history, we have reflections on God’s moral government of the world. We have psalms of faith, resignation, and joy in God’s presence. We have psalms with the more distinct reference to the circumstances of the psalmist, petitions for help or forgiveness, and for thanksgiving. We have national psalms, historical psalms, and psalms relating to the King.” That is the kind of classification we would come up with if we just read them looking at their content and subject matter. A conservative scholar, R.K. Harrison, in his introduction to the Old Testament also categorizes by subject matter. He says:

We have prayers, whether for divine affection, deliverance, intervention or blessing. We have praises both general and specific. We have penitential psalms, including acts of confession, intercessions for the king, the nation, Jerusalem and other nations. We have confession of faith in God as king, as ruler, as moral judge, as governor of the universe. We have homiletical psalms—preaching psalms dealing with wisdom, divine power, the true service of God, and the place of the Torah in national and individual life. We have imprecatory psalms constituting calling down a curse on either national enemies or personal enemies. We have psalms dealing with problems in the moral order involving the suffering of the righteous, the prosperity of the wicked, and hope of immortality.

We have all of these kinds of psalms that we can classify according to subject matter. J. Barton Payne who used to teach at Covenant Seminary does the same thing. More briefly, he says we have psalms of praise, nature, historical psalms, social psalms, imprecatory psalms, penitential psalms, messianic psalms, and liturgical psalms. This is a way of grouping them together, saying, “This Psalm is a little like that Psalm in terms of this feature.”

Let us move to classification by form. We need to be careful whenever we use the term “criticism.” Criticism can mean fault finding, but it can also mean careful, thoughtful appraisal of something. Form criticism is often done by those who are not really embracing the authority of Scripture. Thus it is a tool that has been misused, but I think there is something that we can learn from it. Longman talks about formal categories of psalms: hymns, laments, songs of thanksgiving, psalms of confidence, kingly psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. These are all formal categories. It was Hermann Gunkel who first talked about them or at least whose work is best remembered in this regard. He took a three-part approach: form criticism with three emphases. First, it emphasized the stereotypical forms in terms of a structure, or formal elements, in particular psalms. Secondly, corresponding to a particular formal type, there is what was called the “setting in life.” It was believed that each of these formal categories would have been used in a certain life setting. The third emphasis was on the evolution of form, tracing a history of the literature. This last one emphasis is a little misdirected. But the first one, the idea that there are ideal forms that will help those approaching the text with the right expectation, is very good and I think we can learn from it.

The most common psalm in the Psalter is the lament psalm. You find more laments than anything else in the Psalter. And if that is not true to life, I do not know what is. We probably complain and grumble and bring more requests to God than anything else. We do more of that than thanking Him, but that is the nature of our lives, I suppose, in the human condition. So what are the basic elements of the lament

psalms? They begin with an address to God. Often at the beginning of a lament you will have God addressed in the second person. There will be various epithets employed, various descriptions of God. There may be in this address to God a preliminary cry for help, petition, or description anticipating what the problem is and what the psalmist would like done about it. First is an address to God. Then there is the complaint proper. I do not mean whining and complaining, but the complaint, the lament, what the problem is. Sometimes this element is explicitly introduced, as in Psalm 142:2: “I pour out my complaint before Him; before Him I tell my trouble,” or as in the superscription of Psalm 102: “The prayer of an afflicted man. When he is faint and pours out his anguish before the Lord.” Many times the complaint is not explicitly called a complaint, but we know that when we hear a complaint a problem is being voiced.

What is the motivation for pouring out our hearts before God? One motivation is simply to appease the heart. Many times we talk to someone about a problem and we feel better simply for having talked about it. This last weekend I had a chance to talk to a group of women on how men think. If a wife begins to pour out her heart to her husband, what is the man’s response? To try to fix it. “You have a problem; let us solve your problem.” But what the woman most often wants more than solutions is an understanding ear. She wants to pour out her heart and appease the heart by knowing that someone has heard and understands. That is one of the functions of these lament psalms. But primarily, lament psalms are aimed at calling on God to act.

The third element of these psalms is the confession of trust. This is an element that is rarely absent. I should probably say at the outset, though, that the order of these elements is not always the same. And the various elements do not always just occur once. You can have a confession of trust and then a little later you could have a confession of trust again. But these are the kinds of elements we find. A subcategory of the lament psalms, called psalms of confidence, has been created for the psalms where this expression of trust in God predominates. The fourth element is the petition. So you see the logic of this manner of addressing God: “God, I have a complaint, a problem. I trust you because I know who you are. I know you can do something about it, so would You please? This is my petition.” The psalmist expresses his request. Often the intimacy of relationship to God finds expression in various anthropomorphisms that sometimes shock us. “Listen to me. Open your ear. Look, rouse yourself.” What kind of way is that to talk to God—“Rouse yourself”—to He who neither slumbers nor sleeps? “Wake up. Hurry to answer me. Save me. Return.” We know that He has not gone anywhere, but these are anthropomorphisms, ways that we as human beings cry out to God. A singer, Michael Card, has his elders check out his music to make sure they approve of it. After singing a new song, one of the elders said, “Well, I like the music, but I do not think you can say that. You are coming on rather strong in the way you are addressing God in the song.” But Card had taken the song directly from the Psalter. So sometimes we are shocked by this language of “Rouse yourself. Wake up,” but it is an anthropomorphic way of expressing our petition to God. The fifth element is a vow of praise. The psalm often concludes with a vow of praise, a vow to give thanksgiving when God has done what the psalmist is asking or when He has answered him in some way.

Some have speculated that the vow of praise may be preceded by some word of assurance. For instance, if you went to the temple and had addressed God, stated your complaint, expressed your trust in Him, and laid out your petition, “Lord, this is what I need. Would you please answer me,” some have speculated that the priest may have given some word of assurance. They may have said something like, “The Lord has heard your prayer and will surely answer you” and this would inspire the vow of praise. However, we do not know that for sure. There are some indications that this may have taken place, such as in the story of Hannah. Once Eli the high priest understood that she was not drunk, he comforted her

and said, “The Lord has heard your prayer.” That could be something that inspires the vow of praise. That is the final element in the lament psalms, and a very important element.

There are special kinds of laments. Different designations are given to the lament psalms depending on what the problem or complaint is. They are what are sometimes called, God lament Psalms, when God Himself seems to be the problem to the psalmist. God is absent or inactive, He is not helping the psalmist and the psalmist asks, “Where are You?” Other times, the problem is the psalmist’s enemies, and that is where we begin to get the imprecatory psalm. The psalms often have a petition like, “I am surrounded by my enemies. God, do something! Deal with them.” There is something healthy about that. Usually our tendency is to want to deal with them ourselves. Turning to God and saying, “Lord, I am really mad at this person, but I will not do anything; I leave that person in your hands,” is better than dealing with them ourselves. And finally, there are psalms where the problem really is in the heart of the psalmist—the psalmist’s own sin. The psalmist pours out his heart to God and says, “I have sinned against you.” This is a penitential psalm. Thus within this broad category of lament psalms, you have God lament psalms, imprecatory psalms, and penitential psalms. Some of these categories we have heard in other systems.

We will now look at the structure of a song of thanksgiving. There is not necessarily an address this time, but rather an announcement of the psalmist’s intent to give thanks. The songs of thanksgiving are closely related to the psalms of lament. What might be the relationship of a song of thanksgiving to a psalm of lament? The vow of praise. Remember, the lament psalm concludes by saying, “Lord, I will thank You. I will offer a vow of praise among the assembly when You have answered me.” And this may be the materialization of that promise as the psalmist actually said what he would do. We can learn a lesson from that. So often we are caught up with our needs that we only pour out our hearts and petitions to God; we may not even promise to thank Him openly in the assembly when He answers. But we need to not only remember to promise that, but to do it. We and others would be encouraged if we would. Therefore these psalms begin with the announcement of the intention to give thanks. Usually there is an address to the Lord as a part of that announcement of intent. Then there is the major element, the recounting of the psalmist’s experience. This recounting of the psalmist’s experience involves a mini lament. It goes back and describes three elements. First of all, it describes what the psalmist’s need was. Secondly, it describes his petition, what he had asked. And thirdly, it describes the deliverance, how God delivered him out of his distress, whether it was the distress of a guilty conscience, enemy oppression, or the seeming distance and silence of God. Then the final element is conclusion. The conclusion contains an exhortation of praise or description of the fulfillment of the vows: “I said I would do it and now I have done it.” Distinctive conclusions are not always present. This is a simple structure—an easy way to remember what a song of thanksgiving entails.