

Psalms, III

The three major categories of the psalms are the lament psalms, the songs of thanksgiving, and hymns. The structure of a hymn psalm begins with a call to worship. The call to worship is often addressed to the congregation in the imperative, second person plural, “Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name, make known among the nations what He has done,” Psalm 105:1. The worshippers may even be named, as in Psalm 105:6: “O descendants of Abraham his servant, O sons of Jacob, his chosen ones.” At times, though, the call may be issued to the psalmist’s own soul, as in 103:1: “Praise the LORD, O my soul.” This call to worship begins at the beginning of the psalm but may also be repeated and expanded later in the psalm. The second main element is praise, or the motive of praise: that which is being praised in the hymn. This element often begins with “for” or “because,” as in Psalm 117: “Praise the LORD, all nations! Extol Him, all peoples! For great is His steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD!” This element, often introduced by “for” or “because,” says something about God’s attributes or acts, who God is, or what He has done. The third and final element is simply a recapitulation, which may be an introduction of motives, why the psalmist is offering this hymn at this time, or an inference that is to be drawn from what has been said about God’s acts or His attributes. Sometimes it is a simple “Hallelujah, praise the Lord.” Many hymns end that way. As with the lament psalms, there are subcategories of the hymns. There are hymns of YHWH’s kingship and hymns of Zion where Zion is praised as the place of God’s abode. It was not the geographical place in itself, but Zion was where God dwelt.

What is the distinction, then, between a song of thanksgiving and a hymn? A hymn may not be related to a complaint. A song of thanksgiving recounts a specific need in the life of the psalmist or in the life of the congregation. A song of thanksgiving could recount an individual or communal need, but it is a specific need at a specific time for which a specific petition was made and God acted in behalf of those who cried out to Him. In a hymn the motive for praise may be God as creator and what He has done. It may be a hymn in praise of one of God’s attributes, His love, mercy, compassion, longsuffering, or loving kindness. Therefore the main distinction is that songs of thanksgiving are specific while hymns are more general.

The royal or kingly psalms do not have a particular structure. They do not have these typical elements like the other psalms have had. All of these psalms are distinguished to some extent by content, tone, and vocabulary. But the royal psalms are, as you might expect, distinguished by the fact that they make reference in some way to the king. Gunkel recognized that the royal psalms are not a homogeneous group. They are songs of diverse origin and were drawn together by virtue of this association with the king. Royal psalms could be further subcategorized as royal wedding psalms, coronation psalms, and psalms of the king before, and maybe after, battle. The king was designated to lead in battle, so that is another type of psalm that we encounter fairly frequently in the Psalter.

Another category is wisdom psalms. As with the kingly psalms, the wisdom psalms are not distinguished by a set of structural elements, but there are three identifying characteristics. First of all, there are certain formal features. There is also a didactic intent; it is intended to teach. A wisdom psalm is bent on imparting something: “Listen, my son, and learn what I have to say.” And then there are typical wisdom themes and motifs, such as the contrast of the righteous and the wicked. Psalm 1 is an example of a wisdom psalm. Some of the formal features that are associated with wisdom literature can be found in the wisdom psalms. For example, proverbial sayings are typical of wisdom literature, especially Proverbs, and many of the wisdom psalms sound like they could have come right out of the Proverbs, or at least verses within the psalms. One example is Psalm 37:16: “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked.” If I gave you that to identify, you would probably say

that it came from Proverbs. Compare that with Proverbs 16:8: “Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.” There are numerous other sayings that are quite common in Proverbs that we find in fair proportion also in the Psalter. An example would be Psalm 62:11-12, which says, “One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving.” This is a particularly biblical way of speaking. The writer really means two things; he was just building up to it. Remember we talked about the intensifying character of biblical parallelism? Robert Alter makes the point that you see intensification very clearly in these sorts of sayings. Another example is Proverbs 6:16, which says, “There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to Him.” Which is it, six or seven? It is seven, but the author was building up to that. Robert Alter points out rightly that the Bible seldom says something like, “There are six things the Lord hates, half a dozen that are an abomination to the Lord.” That would be pretty static; there is no real movement there. So we have in Psalms, “One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O Lord, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving.”

Another commonality between Proverbs and the wisdom psalms are the sayings that are called the blessed sayings: “Blessed is the man.” We find that particularly in Proverbs in chapters 10 through 15: “Blessed is the righteous man, but not so the unrighteous man or the wicked man.” Acrostics are another commonality. An acrostic is like an acronym. There are various kinds of acrostics where the first letter in a particular line means something. So in an alphabetic acrostic the first line begins with “A,” the next with “B,” and all the way to “Z.” These alphabetic acrostics are fairly common in the wisdom literature and they are also found in some of the wisdom psalms. In all of these ways we have these formal features that remind us of wisdom literature and they characterize wisdom psalms. This is the first major characteristic of the wisdom psalms: they share these formal features with the wisdom literature.

The second major characteristic of the wisdom psalms is their didactic intent. They are intended to teach something. Psalm 34 says, “Come, my sons, listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” It sounds exactly like Proverbs. The third major characteristic of the wisdom psalms is that they contain main wisdom themes and motifs. Psalm 49 is an example of this: “Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all who live in this world, both low and high, rich and poor alike: My mouth will speak words of wisdom; the utterance from my heart will give understanding. I will turn my ear to a proverb; with the harp I will expound my riddle.” Wisdom, understanding, proverb, riddle—this sounds like wisdom writing.

One last category of the psalms is “other didactic psalms.” These include historical psalms, psalms that celebrate God’s acts in redemptive history for the nation of Israel. We could probably find a place for these among the hymns, those hymns that call others to praise Him either for His attributes or for His actions on a large scale. Some examples are Psalms 78 and 105. These also include psalms of prophetic exhortation. These psalms exhibit a prophetic tone and some prophetic literary feature such as the oracle or promises and threats—those kinds of things that we encounter in prophetic writing. This last category also includes liturgical psalms.

We need to remember that these various ways of classifying the psalms are not mutually exclusive. They are looking at the Psalter from different angles. We can divide it into five books, we can divide it according to content and reference and according to formal type; all of these ways can be helpful. Why is it helpful to have any concept of the formal type of literature that we are dealing with? The problem with form criticism, which we need to guard against, is the temptation to say, “I am going to cram every last psalm into my expectation. This is the ideal form and every psalm has to fit it exactly.” Well, that is not the case. What we ought to do with this is to say, “This is what is expected and I will look for these elements. Now, if I see something else my attention will be particularly drawn to that because the

psalmist is going beyond my expectation in this particular area.” By learning what is expected we have a sharper vision of what is peculiar or exceptional to a particular psalm.

Each of the systems of classification does have some benefit. You may say, “You have been talking about these forms and I want some biblical precedent for that.” That is a good thing to ask. First Chronicles 16:4, describing David when he brought the ark to Jerusalem, says, “He appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the LORD, to make petition, to give thanks, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel.” “To make petition, to give thanks and to offer praise to the Lord”—that sounds like laments, thanksgiving, and hymns, does it not? I think that is about as close as we will come to some kind of actual biblical indication that these expectations that we are inferring from the text were actually felt. That is not to say that a psalmist would think to himself, “Hmm, I am going to write a psalm. I better pull out my manual of psalm types and figure out what I will write.” It may not have been particularly conscious or intentional on their part, but it may have been like when we pray—we have sort of an agreed conventionality to our prayers in certain circles. If you move from one Christian group to another, you may discover that they pray differently. It may surprise you at first but then you learn their expectations, and when you are praying with them you might pray in ways that conform to the general expectations of the group. The form classifications of the psalms may not have been entirely intentional, but I think it helps us in terms of our own analysis.