

Psalms, VI

Ryken teaches literature at Wheaton College and has written much on the Bible as literature. He has a four-part system for explicating a psalm. If you are a teacher or a preacher, or sharing your insights from the Psalms with someone else, this is a good way to do it. You start with the big overview and then become increasingly specific. The idea is to help your audience see the larger picture and then move into the ground level where you are exploring, line by line, the riches of the psalm. These are the four parts.

First, he says, you should give some indication, in a subtle way, of the genre and the implied situation. Psalm titles often have an implied situation, so if you think it fits you can use that. And talk a little about the situation involving the life of David (or the author of the psalm). In this lecture we will be looking at Psalm 2, which does not have a superscription. Therefore we may not be able to say much about the implied situation, but we will seek to describe the genre we are dealing with. What type of literary form is it? Is it a lament, a song of thanksgiving, a hymn, or a wisdom song?

Then we will talk about the intellectual core. What is the topic and theme? What is the difference between a topic and a theme? A topic can be expressed in one word, whereas usually we think of a thematic statement—with a subject and predicate. A topic might be “God’s sovereignty.” A thematic statement would be, “God is sovereign.” Next we will talk about structure and unity. We will start from high up, and then come down. How is this song unified? What are its stanzas? What is the outline of the psalm?

Then we come to what Ryken calls “poetic texture.” Once we have oriented ourselves to the structure and unity of the psalm, we can begin saying, “Let us look at verse 1,” and then go through the psalm line by line. We have been oriented and so we know where we are. We can talk about parallelism at this point as well. We might be able to note, “See how this line carries this a little bit farther. This line parallels this line from before. It sharpens or heightens the other in some way.”

Now looking specifically at Psalm 2, let us talk about the genre and implied situation. Among the ones we have talked about, this psalm is a royal or kingly psalm. “Against Yahweh and His anointed” is a kingly title. The implied situation may be a coronation. Perhaps it is a time when people are making bids of power. It seems to be a time when the nations would have been in tumult. Acts 4:25 ascribes this Psalm to David. We do not have a superscription in the Psalm, but we need to bear in mind what the New Testament says about it. It does sound very much like David is the writer of this Psalm, so I would take that at face value.

Again, looking specifically at Psalm 2, we now turn to the intellectual core, the topic and theme. What would you say the “topic” is? “God’s authority and rule over the nations.” Maybe we could say it is “YHWH’s rule through His anointed.” Can you give a thematic statement? Perhaps, “YHWH rules through His anointed.” Can we bring the opposition and rebellion into this? Maybe something like, “the powers of this world are no match for Yahweh’s anointed.”

What about structure and unity in Psalm 2? There may be other ways to do it, but it works nicely to divide it into four sections: verses 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12. In verses 1-3 the psalmist is speaking. He is wondering at the arrogance of worldly powers in opposing YHWH and His anointed. He asks the question, “Why? How can this be?” In verses 4-6, YHWH Himself responds. There is a description of His derisive response to this earthly rebellion and the terrifying announcement that His king is already installed. Notice the speaker has changed. In the first three verses, it was the psalmist describing the problem or the situation, and at the end of these verses we heard the earthly rulers speaking. In verses 4-

6, we hear YHWH's response and we actually hear Him speaking. In verses 7-9 we hear the anointed king Himself speaking: "Let me tell of the decree of the Lord." Then in verses 10-12 it is the psalmist speaking again. He warns the worldly powers to turn from their arrogance and rebellion, to serve YHWH, and to kiss the Son. In this way, in very brief terms, you could describe the unity and structure of Psalm 2. It does seem to have a nice flow. Speakers change, but once you recognize that, it has a nice flow. Notice that in the text, it does not say "And YHWH said," or "And then the anointed one said," but you can discern that from careful observation.

Now let us look at poetic texture. Is there any focusing or sharpening here? I think so. In verse 2 it says, "They take their stand." That could be an individual act of defiance. Not only do they do that, but they "gather together" (in the next line) in defiance against the Lord. The direct quotation, "'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters,'" is sort of graphic. You see the idea of Hercules' bulging biceps popping the fetters. That is the nature of their rebellion. As the speaker changes, the narrator turns from what is happening on earth to what is happening in heaven: "The one who sits in heaven laughs," that is, the Lord. Laughter can be joviality, but it is specified by the next line, "The Lord scoffs at them." He is laughing in derision. And the objects of His laughter are those who are in rebellion against Him. He thinks it is laughable that humans would rebel against Him in this way. "Then He rebukes them in His anger and terrifies them in His wrath." Knowing what we do about sharpening, intensification, and heightening, I think it is fine to say generally that He will speak to them in His anger. He will have a word with them, and in so doing, will terrify them with His fury. And this is what He will say: "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." This is more or less what we call synthetic parallelism. It is like one continuous sentence.

Then we come to the "anointed one," and He speaks first. I will tell of the decree: "The LORD said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.'" There is a sharpening of these terms. "The nations" and the very "ends of the earth" will be possession of the anointed one, the Son. "You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Break and shatter are clearly parallel terms with a sharpening there.

Having heard from the rebels, the One who sits in heaven, and His anointed one on Mt. Zion, the psalmist returns to the rebels with a warning. "Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son [...] for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." What does that remind you of? "Blessed is the man [...]" So, in Psalm 2 we have the bookend of the introduction of the Psalter. Psalm 1 describes the two ways for the individual to find blessing, and Psalm 2 describes the two ways for the nations. Both include descriptions of what it is that brings joy and happiness.