

Psalms, VII

Proverbs 6:16-19 says,

There are six things the Lord hates
seven that are detestable to Him:
haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush to evil,
a false witness who pours out lies
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

Let me comment on this proverb. It is striking to me that if I were going to make a statement like the one he makes, I am not sure I would have chosen exactly this list. Granted, it makes sense that he began with haughty eyes, because we all know that is one of the most detestable and ridiculous sins. But the one that really surprised me was the last one: “one who stirs up dissension among brothers.” I think as Christians we are very quick to recognize the sins of others and point them out, and yet this is one we can fall prey to easily because the tongue is so difficult to control. We may not always have a lying tongue, but we are pretty good at stirring up dissension among brothers. And that is the seventh, and in a sense, the ultimate thing that is detestable to the Lord. The list begins with pride and ends with dissension. In some of Paul’s lists of heinous sins—drunkenness, orgies, etc.—right there in the middle of the list is dissension. I would encourage you to reflect on this. There are of course other sins that the Lord finds detestable, and yet these are listed for a purpose. This is a sampling, and that one surprised me. We should pray that God would enable us to be those who, by God’s grace, control our tongues. This is especially necessary in the church. Christ is directing the church in the way He wants her to go. But He has appointed human beings, His servants, through whom He has chosen to lead His church. That is, the leadership of a particular church. It is very tempting for us to want to help lead. Now good leaders are delighted if you are consulting the Scripture and making suggestions in a constructive way. That is good. It is our responsibility as Christians to do so. But it is not our responsibility to try to take control where it is not our place to do so. Sometimes there are power struggles in a church that lead to dissension and belie what Jesus said: “They will know we are Christians by our love.” So give attention to the prevention of dissension and recognize that God has appointed these people who lead us. Pray for them, be diligent readers of Scripture, and make suggestions. If you read Scripture and conclude your church is going in the wrong direction, then you can try to earn the right to lead. You may perhaps need to join a different church. But you do not want to conduct a mutiny. What is detestable to God is dissension and discord.

In this lecture we will talk about the shape of the Psalter, and then we will talk about the theology of the Psalter. We will be talking about messianic psalms, and what are sometimes called imprecatory psalms, prefacing that with some comments about the theology of the Psalter. Let us begin by talking about the shape of the Psalter.

First, let me give an introduction. There have been many attempts to discover an overarching logical structure to Psalms. We talked earlier about the way the psalms are classified. But these attempts to discover the organizing genius of the Psalter, as we have it before us, for the most part defeated people’s best attempts. The results have not been entirely satisfactory up to this time. Now, we will see later that

there has been real progress made in recent years. That is exciting, and we will talk a little about that. Let us look at what has been attempted and what has been observed.

Among the organizing helps that have been observed is the fact that the Psalter is divided into five sections or books. Each of the first four books ends in a doxology, a line or two of praise to God concluding with "Amen." In the fifth book, Psalm 150 is itself a doxological conclusion to the fifth book and perhaps to all of psalms. Thus we have a complete array of five books, each ending with a doxology. The books themselves are not explicitly marked in the Bible, but the presence of the doxologies does seem to indicate that this is an intentional division of the Psalter. The doxologies, the "Amen" statements, seem to be markers.

It is interesting to observe that these divisions into five books, in some ways, go against other groupings within the Psalter. Another way the Psalter has been divided is according to the association of a group of psalms with a particular individual. Book 1 is almost entirely made up of Davidic psalms. Book 2 begins in Psalm 42 and begins with some psalms of the Torah, psalms of Asaph, and then goes back to some Davidic songs. Book 3 begins with psalms of Asaph. Book 4 has the psalm of Moses (Psalm 90) and then the orphaned songs, but there are also a few Davidic psalms, just as there had been in the other books. In Book 5 are the psalms of Ascent. This would lead us to say that someone was organizing these because there are groupings in the Psalter. The question really is, "what are the groupings?" There are some groupings by subject matter. Psalms 113-118 are sometimes called "the Egyptian praise psalms." These were used liturgically at the great Jewish festivals. Psalms 120-134 are the psalms of Ascent. These were sometimes called pilgrim psalms. They were probably sung by pilgrims coming to the temple who would be ascending the holy hill to the temple mount.

What other inferences are to be drawn from the above features? Derek Kidner compares the Psalter to a cathedral. He notes that there is a mixture of order and informality in the Psalter. He says this: "The picture that emerges is a mixture of order and informality of arrangement that invites but also defeats the intent to account for every detail of its final form. [...] Its structure is perhaps best compared to that of a cathedral built and perfected over a matter of centuries in a harmonious variety of styles rather than a palace displaying the formal symmetry of a single and all-embracing plan."

Cathedrals grew up over time, and the styles changed from time to time. In a cathedral you can recognize little architectural groupings, if you will, in what became a unified structure. But it was not necessarily uniform in its construction. That is what we have in the Psalter. At least we can say that much. Can we say more? What can we infer from the kind of information that we have been looking at?

Let us move on to the growth of the Psalter. The analogy of the cathedral rightly suggests with respect to the psalms the existence of earlier collections that were used prior to the final compilation of the Psalter. I do not know what your idea of how Scripture was inspired, written, and put in the form that we now have it, but the process is slightly complicated when it comes to Old Testament books in particular. The Pauline epistles are fairly straightforward. They are letters written by Paul. In the Old Testament, we often have books that were built up over time. Does that make them any less inspired than the letters by Paul? No, not at all. The same God who inspired Paul in his letter also inspired perhaps a multiplicity of holy authors as they wrote the psalms, which then became a part of the Psalter. He also oversaw the compilation in stages of the Psalter. We know this kind of thing happened. In Proverbs 25 there is an explicit reference to the proverbs that were copied or transcribed in the time of King Hezekiah. King Hezekiah came two centuries after King Solomon. The Solomonic material was known and retained, but it was not included with the Proverbs until the time of Hezekiah. There is direct biblical evidence for earlier collections. Therefore we believe that there were earlier collections.

You may be saying, “What is the big deal about this?” Let me mention the indirect biblical evidence. Unless we understand the way the Psalter seems to have come about, under God’s providential guidance, we may be troubled by some of what we explicitly uncover in the Psalter. What is the indirect evidence? For one thing, in the Psalter there are some virtually duplicate psalms. If you have duplicate psalms in a merely unified document (which the Psalter is not) you would think, “The editor forgot that on page 3 he had this, and then put the very same thing on page 30. That was a mistake.” Psalm 14 and 53 are an example. The similarities between these two psalms are far too great for us to claim these psalms are not essentially duplicates of one another.

Psalm 14 begins, “For the director of music. A maskil of David.” Psalm 53, “For the director of music. Of David.” If you are studying English literature, you are always worried about the intentional fallacy. If you are a logician you are worried about logical fallacies. But there is only one really big fallacy. Psalm 14:1 begins with the metaphysical fallacy of the fool: “In his heart the fool says, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.” Psalm 53:1 says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, and their ways are vile; there is no one who does good.” This is very similar. 14:2 says, “God looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.” Psalm 53:2 says, “The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.” This is virtually identical. Psalm 53 says “LORD” while 14 says “God.” It is characteristic of Book 2 to sometimes use the name God in place of the name of LORD, or YHWH, the more personal name. The two psalms go on in this way, and in every verse they are virtually identical. Psalm 14:3 says, “All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one.” Psalm 53:3 says, “everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one.” Psalm 14:4 says, “Will evildoers never learn—those who devour my people, as men who eat bread and do not call on the Lord?” Psalm 53:4 says, “Will the evildoers never learn—those who devour my people, as men who eat bread and do not call God?”

But the fifth verses are very different. Psalm 14:5 says, “There they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous.” Psalm 53:5 says, “There they were, overwhelmed with dread, where there was nothing to dread. God scattered the bones of those who attacked you; you put them to shame, for God despised them.” That is quite different. These are the two verses of these psalms that are very, very different from one another. There is a similar sentiment or theme, but this proves that they are not simply duplicate psalms. They are virtually duplicate psalms, but one psalm is a modification of the other. And both are perfectly acceptable inspired Scripture.

Then they end on the same note. Psalm 14:6-7 says, “You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge. Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of His people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad.” Psalm 53:6 says, “Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores the fortunes of His people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad.” Again, Psalm 53 uses God rather than LORD.

There are other examples of this, but I wanted you to see firsthand how similar these psalms are. What do we make of that? What is likely to explain that phenomenon? How do we explain the difference in these two? A student was asking if perhaps a Jewish audience, as opposed to a Gentile audience, might account for the preference of the name God as opposed to the name YHWH. We will talk about why that might be a possibility.

The other duplicate psalms include Psalm 40:13-17 and Psalm 70. Psalm 108 finds its twin in two places: Psalm 57: 7-11 and Psalm 60:5-12. Those two sections together constitute Psalm 108. The end of Psalm 72 is further evidence of the compilation of the Psalter over time. It is the ending of book two. The last verse of Psalm 72 says, “This concludes the prayers of David, son of Jesse.” Either we have to say that none of the Davidic psalms that follow are prayers of David, or we can say this reference is correct in regard to an earlier collection. There was an earlier collection, and it rightly ended with this statement. But in the present shape of the Psalter, we are not to interpret it as saying there will be no more psalms of David in the rest of the Psalter. Also, there are often references in 1 and 2 Chronicles to the poles with which the Ark of the Covenant was carried as being “still visible to this day.” The temple had been destroyed, and so in the day of the original audience the poles were no longer visible. By the time of the final compilation of these books, the Ark of the Covenant had probably been taken and destroyed. God is not the protector of property, *per se*. The ark symbolized His presence, but He is not bound to it. My point is that the Chronicles were using source material that used that statement. The source material was from a time when you could still see those poles. The same kind of thing may be happening here as the end of Book 2 refers back to an earlier collection.

There is a preference for the name YHWH in book one and for God, *Elohim*, in book two. This has led some to refer to Book 2 as the “Elohistic Psalter.” There are some possible reasons that we know of. There is a possibility that a particularly Jewish audience is addressed in the first book. Craigie speculates this way: “The accumulation of evidence strongly suggests they compiled the Elohistic Psalter from earlier collections and that their editorial revisions included the deliberate and frequent revision of Yahweh to *Elohim*. The process may indicate that the purpose of the compilation was the production of a collection of hymns specifically designed for temple worship at a time when the divine name, YHWH, was used with considerable hesitation.”

Many of you are familiar with the practice among orthodox or conservative Jews of avoiding saying the divine name. They do not tend to pronounce the name, lest they desecrate it. What they say with their lips they regard as a sacrifice to God. Just as a sacrifice should be perfect and without blemish, they are very cautious about saying the divine name. That is current Jewish practice, and I am not sure how far back that stretches. I am not really happy with that explanation. There may be something else at work. Mays, in his commentary, has another explanation which I like a bit better. He says, “This revision may have been a monotheizing procedure to emphasize that Israel’s God is the God of all the earth.” In other words, the name YHWH was closely related to Israel—He was their personal God, their covenant God—but what they said about YHWH the rest of the world needed to know. The hymns of praise, psalms of thanksgiving, and models of prayer needed to be known by the rest of the world. And there was a universalistic, missionary intent from the beginning of God’s dealing with His people. So the psalms in Book 2 may have been more consciously Gentile-friendly. “They refer to the higher being as god, so let us let them know we are talking about God. This is not whom they think of as god, but the true God.” This is purely speculative.

So what can we summarize? Psalmody was clearly an early phenomenon in early Israel. It has been around for a long time. Obviously these psalms would have been collected into earlier collections, and so the Psalter was built up like a cathedral when we see duplicate psalms and such.

What about recent studies concerning the editorial shape of the Psalter? Wilson has studied the Qumran, or Dead Sea Scrolls, as related to the Psalter. He came to the conclusion that books 1-3 were pretty well formed and set by the first century BC and had achieved a high degree of stability. On the other hand, books 4-5 show a higher degree of variability extending into the first century according to his interpretation of the Dead Sea Scroll evidence. Then he went to work analyzing the junctures and titles,

the ordering and the kinds of psalms. He was trying to discover if there was some intentionality to the editing of the Psalter. Not only do we have distinct collections that have become distinct books, but it also seems like there is an overarching strategy that has been applied in the seams between the books and the psalms in the Psalter. He comes to this conclusion: "I have been able to show that, first, the psalm divisions of the Psalter are real, editorially induced divisions and not accidentally induced." He would say the organization is intentional and not simply accidental. But he also says, "Secondly, the separating and binding functions of the altar and genre groupings have also been discerned. Thirdly, the lack of a superscription is an indication of a tradition of combination with the previous psalm." Remember the orphaned psalms? That may mean there was a tradition of reading them with the preceding psalm. "Fourthly, the use of hallelujah [the praise songs] indicates the conclusion of segments. And the use of thanksgiving psalms indicates the introduction of segments." So he is discerning what he calls concluding and beginning markers of segments. And then he says, "Finally, the existence of thematic correspondences between the beginning and ending of psalms is also evident." He is beginning to see a thematic relationship between the individual psalms, and a kind of intentionality to the arrangement. "All of these findings," he says, "demonstrate the presence of editorial activity at work in the arrangement of the psalms." Having demonstrated the activity, Wilson considers what might be the editorial agenda. Is there a thematic progression throughout the Psalter? He believes the seam psalms, the psalms at the junctures between the different books, show an interesting progression and thought between kingship and the Davidic covenant.

What Wilson sees is that covenant is the central feature of the Psalter. The first book deals with the covenant proclaimed, the second book with the covenant passed on or transmitted, the third book with the covenant failed. Book three ends with Psalm 89 which is a psalm of desperation: "Lord, what has happened to our arrangement here?" In Book 4 we have the answer to the problem. Book three raises the problem: "Has the covenant failed? What about the promises to the Davidic king?" And Book 4 answers that by stressing that YHWH is king. God is a refuge independent of the human monarchy, therefore trust in the Lord. That seems to be a dominant theme in Book 4. In Book 5 we see David as a model of individual and national response. He places Psalm 119 at the center of that.

As we discover the editorial genius that has put the psalms together as they are arranged, we are seeing the divine intentionality, because God is in charge of the putting together of this book. It seems there is enough intentionality that we must believe God was guiding it. So do we interpret it as a whole or singly? The answer is both. We can say, "How does the position of this psalm influence my understanding of that psalm?" Originally they were composed in specific circumstances. The arrangement we have here is a theological structuring. But just as each psalm was composed by inspiration, so their arrangement was inspired. They were composed individually and were brought together by some divine design into this particular shape.