

Book Review: W.H. Bellinger, *Psalms: A Guide to Studying the Psalter*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2012.

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DML 970: Preaching the Psalms

Summary of the Chapters

1. Chapter One: Getting Started

The Getting Started chapter explains the Psalms as songs of faith which “convey the people’s faith and helps them define and understand their encounter with God” (3). Faith journey was a pilgrimage. Psalms were not only found in the Israelite texts but also archeologists have discovered similar texts through out the region belong to other faiths. The poetic form of psalms was a reaction to the ancient Near Eastern culture stemming from their sociohistorical setting. The first chapter explains the shape of the Psalter and compares it to Torah as both have five sections. Another way to look at the Psalter is by collections based on superscriptions. Sixty-six psalms out of 150 are categorized as Davanic which does not mean that David wrote them.

“David gave important initial impetus to the writing of psalms and to their use in worship in Jerusalem. He may well have written psalms, but the Psalter provides little evidence on the question of authorship (11).

Thought, not the sounds determines the form of a psalm. The chapter one lay out the shape of the Psalter: title, structure, superscription, and collection.

2. Lessons from the Past

The second chapter quotes many well know Old Testament scholars such as Hermann Gunkel and Walter Brueggemann and helps developing questions to ask when studying the Psalms. Gunkel classified the Psalms into the following major type categories: Songs of Zion, enthronement psalms including enthronement psalms, community lament, individual lament, individual psalms of thanksgiving, and royal psalms. He also lists distinctive minor types: pilgrimage psalms of thanksgiving, community psalms of thanksgiving, wisdom psalms, general liturgies, prophetic liturgies, “Torah” liturgies, and mixed types such as Psalm 36 which relates to the categories of lament, hymn, and wisdom (21).

Gunkel argued that the Psalm types originated in ancient Israel’s worship, where as his student, Sigmund Mowinckel added “that most Psalms in the Psalter were also used as a part of worship” (24). Walter Brueggemann classifies the Psalms with the categories of orientation, disorientations, and new orientation. Other important names to know when interpreting the Psalms are: Claus Westermann, Brevard Childs, and Gerald Wilson.

3. Reading the Psalms

Chapter 3 looks at the language used in Psalms including the use of divine names, repeated words or phrases, terms that carry significance and metaphors. The chapter states four questions to ask when studying the Psalms: (1) What is the type/structure of the psalm? (2) How was the psalm used in worship? (3) In what context does the psalm occur in the book of Psalms? (4) How does the psalm use language-specifically, parallelism, divine names, repetition, loaded terms, figure of speech? (46).

This is a beautiful quote from Claus Westermann: “For us, prayer is something a person does or is admonished to do - a human act. But in the Psalter, crying to God grows out of life itself; it is a reaction to the experiences of life, a cry from the heart” (47).

4. Laments: Out of the Depths

This chapter discusses mostly individual lament including a common structure of a lament. Lament addresses God, followed by a complaint and petition which is usually in an imperative verbal form. Laments ends with a positive conclusion and confidence that God has heard the prayer, and a statement of trust in God. The conclusion may have at times been added by a priest as a “prophetic” element. Laments describe suffering: material, mental, physical or spiritual. There is a sense of God being absent. Communal laments stem from crisis, difficulties, exile etc. Laments were part of the worship. Even individual laments were done in community as part of public worship. “The laments demand that God relate to all of life, even the crisis” (76).

5. Psalms of Praise: Enthroned on the Praises of Israel

Psalms of praise are about the celebration of joy in human experience. Westermann suggests that there are two basic categories of psalms: plea and praise (80). Thanksgiving because God had delivered them. Just like lament psalms there are also individual and communal psalms of thanksgiving. A typical structure of a thanksgiving psalms is: introduction, narrative (crisis, plea for help and deliverance), and conclusion. “The conclusion of the lament psalm often includes a vow to praise the God who delivers. The psalms of Thanksgiving fulfill the vow” (83). Psalms of praise use exuberant thanks and praise to God and frequently use the name LORD in direct address as they celebrate the life-giving presence of God. Hymns of praise were used during festivals and in the temple. Psalm 23 is an example.

6. Royal Psalms: A Covenant with My Chosen One, David My Servant

Chapter Six explains arguments between multiple scholars regarding the types of Psalms. Westermann argues there are two types: Praise and lament. Smend suggests that “I” refers to the nation of

Israel. Kirkland suggests that the enemy in lament refers to national enemies. And John Eaton argues for the royal interpretation of many psalms. Bellinger, however follows the work of Emil Balla in his view of royal psalms. Royal psalms usually have a king, victory comes from Zion, community is emphasized, and the primary issue is the success of the king. “While the royal psalms may not be numerous, they were central for ancient Israel because they spoke of a foremost way in which the God of Zion was active among the people-by way of the Davidic monarchy” (127).

7. Wisdom Psalms: I will Instruct You

Again there are arguments between biblical scholars regarding the wisdom category. James Crenshaw cautions against the category of wisdom psalms because the term is difficult to clarify. Raymond Van Leeuwen states that wisdom is a way of looking at life rather than a clearly identifiable genre. Bellinger however suggests that the category of wisdom psalms is appropriate because of the likely origin of the psalms. Wisdom psalms originated among ancient Israel’s wisdom circles whose purpose was to pass teaching and warning to the future generations through teacher-learner relationship.

8. The Psalms and Faith

Bellinger describes in the final chapter nine theological themes in Psalter. (1) The honest dialogue of faith: how to have a conversation with God as it relates to every human condition. (2) The reign of God: one of the central affirmations of the the Psalms, God is present even when the reign of God is opposed. (3) Worship: a corporate response to divine presence and activity including praise, confession, proclamation, and commitment. (4) Praise: recounting God’s presence rather than an emotion. (5) Pain: laments speak of the absence of God in an honest worship. (6) Hope: God’s involvement in life, found both in the absence and the presence of God. (7) Justice: “Psalms seek righteousness and justice for the oppressed, and do so in ways that make readers uncomfortable (149). (8) Community: life and hope is found in community which is prerequisite for life. (9) Providence: affirmation of the LORD’s providence is a major part of the story of God with community.

Aid in Sermon Preparation

Gunkel’s classification of Psalms and having a list of each genre is helpful in sermon preparation. It is a good guide and starting point. This book gives an understanding to what to look for in different types of psalms, what was an important aspect of that type psalm during the ancient worship. The book gives many examples of how the various psalms were structures which is helpful in preparation for sermon points.