

DML 970 Preaching the Psalms  
Book Review: Psalms by W.H. Bellinger Jr.

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The editors systematically compiled the Psalter into five books. Each book consists of a grouping of psalms, but in general, Psalms are pilgrimage songs of faith in Yahweh. History matters greatly when interpreting the Psalms. A specific historical event can determine the interpretation, e.g., Ps 46 and 48 mention Jerusalem in crisis; thus, scholars interpreted these psalms in light of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 BC. However, it is difficult to determine appropriate historical backgrounds and personal life events; therefore, my approach should be humble and careful. Reading the Psalter from the beginning till the end can be challenging. Thus, it is most efficient to categorize according to the types: Praise, Lament, Royal Psalms, and Wisdom Psalms.

Psalms as poetry are the most complex in their succinct, highly structured Hebrew poetic expressions, including thought rhyme and parallelism as primary characteristics. A thought determines the poetic form in Hebrew. Particularly, parallelism can be very helpful in understanding psalmists' communication as I prepare a sermon. Parallelism is "a kind of echo effect intrinsic to Hebrew poetry" (34). Synonymous parallelism means the second line repeats a similar thought rhyme from the first line, e.g., "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him" (8:4). In antithetic parallelism, the second line introduces a contrasting thought, i.e., "For the Lord knows the way of the righteousness, but the way of the wicked will perish" (1:6). The second line in stair-step parallelism elaborates the same thought even further, i.e., "for the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods" (95:3). In addition, literary features such as repetition, word play, ambiguity, and figures of speech must be carefully considered as I enter the world of the text (35).

The Psalm's use of language must be thoroughly studied as well. The rhetorical analysis, with a careful examination of its persuasiveness, helps since the Psalms often evoke responses from listeners. This process begins with a discovery of the central purpose of the psalm in its opening lines, which is usually either a plea for a crisis or a call for praise from the listeners. Further, movement within a psalm, either horizontal or vertical, can help with the interpretation with the four questions in mind: 1) How does

the psalm use divine names? 2) What words or phrases (synonyms) does the psalm repeat? 3) How does the text use loaded terms such as justice, righteousness, and steadfast love? These terms carry special significance for the tradition of ancient Israel's faith. 4) What figures of speech (metaphors, images) does the psalm incorporate? When interpreting a psalm, I must also ask the following four questions: 1) What is the type/structure of the psalm? 2) How was the psalm used in worship? 3) How has the community shaped the psalm? 4) To what end does the psalm use language – parallelism, divine names, repetition, loaded terms, and figures of speech?

Interpretation can begin with noting the parallel structures for their echo effects and then finding the plot of a psalm. For example, the parallel structures in Ps 103 are as follows: three instances of the word "bless" and five phrases with the word "who." It is about a response to God as the one WHO gives life. The verbs used concerning God include forgive, heal, redeem, crown, satisfy, and work. The name of God, Yahweh, becomes more specific as the psalm progresses in v. 6 through 7. Then, The Lord is contrasted in v. 9-10. Finally, v.11-14 return to God with a loaded term (steadfast love), repeated four times, displaying an AB B'A' parallel structure. V. 8 uses synonymous parallelism, and comparison and contrast are used in v. 12-13, 6-14, and 15-18. The psalm begins and ends with the thought/concept of "bless."

Keeping in mind the four types of psalms (Lament, Praise, Royal, and Wisdom Psalms), first, lament psalms, especially individual laments, comprise most of the Psalter. The Psalter praises God in all human experiences, including God's absence as well as his abundant presence. Lament psalms capture and reflect the condition of human hearts in real time and space, including suffering, despair, pain, hopelessness, and anguish. The lament psalms come with a typical structure as in Ps 13: 1) invocation (v.1), 2) complaint (v.2), 3) petition (v.3-4), and 4) positive conclusion with an expression of confidence in God (v.5-6). When determining the setting, superscription is helpful to decide on the setting as in Ps 102, "a prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord," which points to the crisis and the cultic setting of prayer. Although Ps crisis describes one(s) gripped by the power of Sheol/death, interpretation of the psalm doesn't need to be limited to only one type of crisis

because the lament psalms depict all sufferings, complexly intertwined among the material, mental, physical, and spiritual realities. And community laments arose from a national crisis, as in the case of Ps 137, which is set in the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Both individual and community laments are prayers spoken by real people, in real trouble, in worship, seeking God's help and intervention.

Laments are disorientation psalms according to Brueggemann's terms (orientation, disorientation, and new orientation). As I interpret, I need to determine the enemies in the lament. However, it is difficult and confusing to identify the enemies in the laments because they can vary from sorcerers to black magic practitioners to national enemies to wicked who oppose the righteous. Again, I must be careful and humble as I prepare a sermon and not communicate definitively.

Imprecatory Ps 137 and 109 must be studied even more carefully because they voice the heartache of a worshiper who has been wronged and seeking justice from God. Thus, these psalms are fighting against injustice and the enemies of God and His worshipers. Lamenting worshipers do not take matters into their own hands, but in a remarkably honest way, they present their requests to God the Judge. Interpreting the lament psalm must include its unique characteristics of the positive ending of the profession of faith in God, the movement from sorrow to joy, and its many possible settings, including exilic experiences and individual crises. Many psalms can be prayed by anyone experiencing distress (e.g., Ps. 6, 102), and this is important to incorporate in my sermon that the community of faith shapes the laments based on their needs and possible for all generations to pray in various settings to facilitate and promote trust in God.

A lament is a plea to and persuasion of God to deliver, progressing from trouble to resolution. E.g., Ps 6 is an individual lament in a possible sickness (v.3, 6-8), thus probably used in a healing ritual. Although it is shaped in a particular setting and cause, it applies to all believers. In its rhetoric, the name Yahweh appears several times in the plea for help, indicating a positive relationship between God and the worshiper. And the word study of 'hesed' and 'sama' also gives reasons for the positive ending of the lament. When preaching the lament, I need to highlight that it is a part of the honest dialogue of faith between humans and God in times when God seems absent or inactive. Not only do I need to preach the

laments, but I also need to teach people how to lament, for it is a “brutally honest prayer from the depth of life” (72).

Psalms of Praise structure follows 1) introduction with a call to praise (“praise the Lord, all nations; Ps 117:1a); 2) body with the reasons for praising God (“who made heaven and earth; Ps 146:6a) or sometimes with a narrative of a crisis (Ps 30:6-7) and a plea for help (Ps 30:8-11); and 3) conclusion with a renewed vow and a call to praise, often with a repetition of the introduction (“hallelujah and praise the Lord” Ps 117:1-2 & “I will praise you forever” Ps 30:12). Typically, joy marks one of the characteristics of the psalms of praise, and Yahweh is the subject of the praise. They show a glimpse into “the atmosphere of regular temple worship” (83), celebrating Yahweh’s greatness in history. They “emerge from a context of praise in ancient Israel’s regular worship and festivals” (84), commemorating and celebrating “Yahweh’s glory and the manifestation of his presence and activity to the worship community of faith” (84). E.g., a general hymn, Ps 150, praises Yahweh based on the proven history of God’s deliverance and saving activities, his characters of faithfulness, and loving kindness. Its purpose is to help people encounter God in a renewed way and see the “impact of past events upon the present” (84). Praise is a communal response and worship to Yahweh, as evidenced in the imperative, “hallelujah,” in the plural form. Ps 150 uses the rhetorical device of repetition, creating echo effects. The phrase “praise him” appears nine consecutive times at the beginning of lines; therefore, it urges worshippers to praise God.

Dealing with the royal psalms, I must understand that they come with varying themes, concerns, and forms, including lament and thanksgiving. The king is the common thread and a substantial figure in pre-exilic Jerusalem. The king ruled over the people as God’s chosen representative, and God guaranteed the king’s rule and kingdom in return. The Davidic kings had a central role in the religious life of Israel and were closely connected to temple worship. This is the backdrop of the royal psalms. The king serves as a victor and a defender of the faith and the powerless. As God’s adopted son, the king stands between people and God and willingly and boldly asks Yahweh for help. E.g., Ps 2 is related to the coronation of the king and declares God’s commitment to the monarch and God’s guarantee of the Davidic kingdom.

The purpose of the royal psalms is to give people hope and encouragement for faith in waiting for a just kingdom, ultimately pointing to Yahweh as the “King.”

Due to their different form and origin, wisdom psalms need to be treated separately from other psalms. They were written to teach and warn future generations (“my son”) of the way of life that God created and often display the following characteristics: betterment, blessedness, warning (“be not like a horse” Ps 32:9), address (“hear this, all people” Ps 49:1), and simile, numerical saying, or rhetorical question (Ps 1:4). It often contrasts the righteous to the wicked (Ps. 1) and includes instruction on daily living to choose the way of the righteous (Ps 1 and 112:5). Ps 1 is significant since it sets the tone for the entire Psalter with the choice of righteousness with reference to Torah, Yahweh’s instruction.

The Psalter is a prayer to God, and its instruction has to do with the honest dialogue at the core of the life of faith and people’s lives. From the beginning of the Psalter (Ps 1), this real voice of the community of faith prays, laments, complains of pain, places hope in Yahweh, seeks justice from the King, Yahweh, trusts in his providence, and praises. It dramatically ends with the uninhibited praise of God in Ps 150, declaring that the faith journey in the righteous way of God is indeed satisfying.

A lesson for me is that the Hebrew text must drive my interpretation, and I must not speculate too much to find the exact backdrops and BE ok with ambiguity. I also need to see the entire forest and the trees up close. And it requires a careful study of the whole Psalter and individual Psalms while asking the four questions: 1) What is the type/structure of the psalm? 2) How was the psalm used in worship? 3) How has the community shaped the psalm? 4) To what end does the psalm use language – parallelism, divine names, repetition, loaded terms, and figures of speech?