

1-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Willis, Timothy (2012) "His Steadfast Love Endures Forever: General Remarks on the Psalms," *Leaven*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol4/iss1/3>

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His Steadfast Love Endures Forever

General Remarks on the Book of Psalms

by Tim Willis

It is not my intention in this essay to lay out *the way* to read and study the Psalms, because I am convinced that they were purposefully written with just enough ambiguity to be read in several different ways—from the standpoint of the individual and from the standpoint of the group; in the face of physical challenges and in the face of spiritual ones; to speak to kings and slaves, men and women, young and old, of any nation. It is my intention to offer some insights that have enhanced my understanding and appreciation of the Psalms, hoping that others will benefit.

Who Wrote the Psalms?

It is a misleading generalization to speak of the book of Psalms as a collection of 150 songs composed by King David. Just less than half of the 150 psalms bear superscriptions attributing them to David. Several other authors are also given in these superscriptions; one-third mention no author at all. Several psalms reflect a historical situation much later than the lifetime of David (e.g., Psalms 89 and 137). The book is now divided into five “scrolls” (Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150); and evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests that, as late as the second century BC, the present arrangement of the psalms was followed through the first two or three “scrolls” only, but probably not in the remaining ones. These items together indicate that the present book of Psalms contains psalms composed by

a number of individuals who represent a variety of occupations and who lived over a span of several centuries. The final stages of the era of psalms-composition overlap with a long process of collecting and arranging the psalms that encompasses much of the Second Temple Period (from 520 BC to 70 AD), a process that involved yet more people.

I say all this not to “burst someone’s bubble” about Davidic authorship and the divine inspiration of the Psalms, but to point to the richness and variety in this book. There probably were other kings, professional musicians, priests, prophets, sages and scribes among its composers. It is likely that some were not “important” individuals at all. If the rest of Scripture is any indication, some were women (see Exod 15:21; Judg 5:1; 1 Sam 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55).

These psalmists utilized a wide array of poetic forms and devices to speak to many different human experiences in their compositions. Some psalms are acrostic, some use refrains, some are chiasmatics. Some are built around key words; some, around complementary ideas. Some use mythical themes and symbols; some are drawn from real history. Some were popular songs or perhaps a hodgepodge of song fragments. Some are addressed to God, some are about God, some are about God’s people. Some were probably written for public performance; some, for private meditation. Some seem to express the thoughts of the entire community of believers at once; some, the feelings of only one

person; and some are probably intended as conversations between a community leader and the congregation.

In spite of all this variety, there is one characteristic shared by each of the psalmists: each one writes with the conviction that a loving and faithful God is working in the lives of his people. Some write in times of great hardship and frustration. They direct our attention to God, because they know him to be faithful and loving; and they look to him alone for help. Some write in times of great joy and celebration. They too direct our thoughts toward God, because they attribute their happiness to God's faithfulness and love. Some write to encourage and teach others. They focus our attention on the need to recognize the lordship of the faithful and loving God in human existence.

The Psalms and Form Criticism

A dominant element in scholarly research of the Psalms in this century concerns the identification of the literary forms ("types") in the book. More than a dozen forms have been identified, but three are primary: laments, hymns of praise and thanksgiving, and wisdom psalms. The other "types" of psalms are either sub-types of these or closely related to them.

To many people the identification of a psalm's literary "type" might seem like a poor use of one's time and energies. Why can't a person simply read a psalm, meditate and pray on it, and benefit from whatever insights about life it has to offer? While this is certainly a valid (not to mention rewarding) approach to the Psalms, I believe that a recognition of the findings about psalm-types can greatly enhance our appreciation of each psalm and the book as a whole. It is hoped that this will in turn enhance our worship, as we should naturally consider how our own worship-response to God compares with that expressed in the Psalms by our spiritual ancestors of ancient Israel.

Laments

The most common type of psalm is the "lament" (also called "prayer"). Essentially, these are the psalms which voice the thoughts and feelings of individuals during "unhappy" times. In its fullest form the "lament" psalm-type has five sections: address to God, complaint (what is the problem), petition (what would the worshipper like God to do about the problem), statement of trust (what is it about God that explains why one would expect help from him), and thanksgiving (what the worshipper will do when God deals with the problem). This combination of elements is found time and time again in the psalms,¹

while one or more of these elements are found in many others.

But what good does it do to break apart a beautiful psalm into little pieces like this? I would urge that it helps us see the whole Psalm more clearly. One must see all of these parts—and that they complement each other in the psalmists' minds—in order to comprehend fully the mindset of a person speaking a lament in the Bible. In a lament, one is not simply complaining or petitioning God for help; those are merely parts of a much fuller expression. The heart of this expression is humble reliance on a faithful and loving God. Five observations about the basic elements of a lament help us gain this perspective.

First, the presence of complaint sections in a biblical lament demonstrates that expressing one's heartache is acceptable to God. It does not mean that one has given up or is about to give up on God. A complaint is a description of something that brings sorrow and pain to one of God's people, and God expects us to express that sorrow and pain to him. It is not interpreted as a denial of Paul's statement that "all things work together for good." In fact, it reveals a strong acceptance of that notion; but to understand how this is so, we must look at the other components of the lament.

Second, a lament is directed *toward* God, not against him (note the "direct address"). Neither is it directed toward anyone else (i.e., an idol, or some human leader). This implies that a lament is actually an expression of reliance on God. It is directed toward him because of the kind of God he is known to be, expressed in the lament's "statement of trust." This section often refers to God as king of the universe, creator and judge of all living things, who is known especially for his love and faithfulness.² This means that the writers of the psalms voice their complaints to the Lord because he is a loving God who cares about them. They petition him because he is a faithful God who will not forget his people to whom he has made promises. Thus, a lament is not spoken as a test of God, nor does it demonstrate a lack of faith in him. The psalmists believe that the Lord is a God who can and will do something to help his people when they are going through pain or sorrow. There is no uncertainty about that. In fact, they are so certain about it that they pray to him—and him alone—without holding back anything.

A third observation concerns the "petition" section of the lament. Many believers have commented that we put far too much emphasis and time on the "asking" side of prayer. In fact, I heard a speaker say once that prayer is nothing more than a pious attempt to manipulate God. This is not the

sentiment found in the psalms of lament. Because a petition is often spoken in the same breath as the direct address to God or the statement of trust, we see that a deep and genuine humility must be a primary component. The biblical laments remind us that we are petitioning the Lord—the king of the universe, the creator and sustainer of all life, the judge of all peoples—when we pray. The outcome is being left in his hands (see below on “imprecations”).

Two final observations arise from what is perhaps the most surprising of all the parts of a lament. This is the section of thanksgiving.³ There are two common explanations for the presence of a section of thanksgiving in a lament. One explanation is that a lament would have been voiced as part of a sacrificial ritual, with most of the lament coming before the offering is actually made. At the end of the sacrifice, it is believed, the one officiating pronounced God’s acceptance of it. The thanksgiving section, then, comes after the offering is completed and the statement of God’s acceptance of the offering has been spoken. Thus, the lament is seen as one side of a conversation with God (whose part in the “conversation” is voiced by the priest). A second explanation is that the writers are so confident that the Lord will hear their cry that they speak thanksgiving in anticipation of what they are absolutely certain will happen. In either case, thanks is being given to the Lord and no other person or thing, and it is given before the response is actually seen. In a sense, then, the thanksgiving section of a lament is essentially a statement of faith. Even before he acts, God receives credit for his response.

Another observation about the thanksgiving section of many laments is that they reveal an element of reassurance for other believers, an “evangelistic” component. As a part of their confidence in God, those lamenting see their situation as an opportunity-in-the-making for showing others that a loving and faithful God is working in our world.

In sum, the biblical lament is an expression of extreme reliance on God. He and he alone is addressed. The problem is laid at his feet, because the speaker is confident that God can and will deal with the problem. Although a particular desired response is voiced (the petition), that too is left in God’s hands. Credit for the resolution of the problem is given to God (pledge of thanksgiving), apparently

even before it is a physical reality. The long-term result is that others, believers and non-believers alike, will recognize God’s hand in the life of the psalmist and come to put their trust in him.

Related Types of Psalms

One type of psalm which is often misunderstood is the “imprecation.”⁴ This is a special kind of “petition”; so, in the light of the broader understanding of the lament, we see that imprecations are actually situations in which one hands over to God one’s feelings of anger and hostility toward others. God is not some genie being brought up as the

ultimate weapon against one’s enemies. Instead, the mindset of the lament shows that the speaker is appealing to God to fulfill his role as universal king and judge, rather than taking the matter into one’s own hands. The imprecation implicitly accepts the statement, “Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord.”

Corresponding to the imprecation is the “intercession,” a petition made to God on behalf of someone else (see Jas 5:13-18). In the Psalms, intercessions seem to be limited to prayers on behalf of the house of David and Jerusalem.⁵ Such psalms reflect the notion that the fate of Israel is indelibly intertwined with the fate of the house of David (see 2 Sam 5:12; 7:18-29; 1 Kgs 9:3-9). In these psalms, a central assumption is that the well-being of the house of David and Jerusalem are completely in the hands of God; the house of David does not control its own fate. Similarly, as is expressed in the petition section of many laments, God’s love and faithfulness are crucial; Jerusalem and the house of David are sustained solely because of those divine qualities (Pss 61:6-7; 89:1-2, 14, 24, 33, 49).

Hymns of Praise and Thanksgivings

The counterpoint to the biblical “laments” are those psalms that express one’s thoughts during a time of happiness and joy. There are two basic types here: the “hymn of praise,” in which one speaks of the characteristics of God as seen in nature, history, etc.; and the “thanksgiving,” in which one addresses God and recalls specific deeds which God has done in response to an earlier petition by the worshipper(s). The common motif in all of these psalms is that the Lord is a loving and faithful God. As such, he is to be the object of our praise and

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thanksgiving. Humans are not to attribute their success and happiness to their own efforts or goodness, nor to fate or some other “force.” God, and God alone, is to receive praise for all that is good in our lives.

God is most commonly praised as sovereign king.⁶ He manifests his sovereignty in the roles of creator and sustainer of the earth,⁷ judge⁸ and protector of his people.⁹

In this, it is essential to recognize two items. First, we must pause to notice that these psalms assume that things do not just “happen”; they are overseen by God. For example, the rains come and nourish the earth because God ordains it, not because of nature alone. The wicked fall because God ordains it, not because they are weak. God’s people marched from Egypt and inhabited their land because God called them out and was with them, not because of their own strength. It is only natural, then, that all praise be directed toward God. Second, the psalms of praise repeatedly call attention to the fact that it is God’s love and faithfulness which are the basis for all that he does as king. For example, Psalm 33 introduces praise for the Lord as creator of the heavens and the earth (verses 6-9), overseer of all the nations (verses 10-17), and deliverer of his people (verses 18-19) by speaking of his uprightness, faithfulness, righteousness, justice and steadfast love (verses 4-5). Psalm 136 summarizes the stories of creation, exodus and conquest, and every line is echoed with the refrain, “For his steadfast love endures forever.” This refrain is the psalmist’s explanation for all of God’s actions.¹⁰

As mentioned with the laments, there is a natural “evangelistic” by-product in many psalms of praise, when others are called on to join in praising God. Israelites and foreigners alike are told of what God has done, in an effort to convince them to worship God as king, creator, and judge.¹¹

The “thanksgiving” is in many ways a link between the “hymn of praise” and the “lament.” It contains thanks (naturally) and praise to God for a particular manifestation of his working in the world. A good example of this is Psalm 107. In this psalm, thanks is given to God for taking care of various people who cry out to him—the hungry and thirsty (vss 4-9), prisoners (vss 10-16), the sick (vss 17-22), travelers (vss 23-32) and the poor and needy (vss 33-43). As in Psalm 136, the common refrain here is that each type of person calls out to God for help and then thanks him for showing his steadfast love. The deeds for which thanks is given are usually ones for which the psalmist had petitioned God earlier; so, the thanksgiving is closely tied in some respects to the lament. This is not surprising, considering that

many laments contain a section of thanksgiving. In fact, it is also true that some thanksgivings contain small sections of petition (see Psalms 9, 40).

Wisdom and Related Psalms

The psalms that remain are psalms addressed to other persons, primarily for the purpose of instructing them about God and how to worship him appropriately. This worship can be individual or communal, private or public. The most common type within this group is the wisdom psalm, so called because of characteristics it shares with proverbs and other wisdom forms of literature. Like that literature, wisdom psalms probably contain the words of advisors and teachers, either professional wise men (“sages”) or parents. Such people give advice for living a rewarding life (Psalms 49, 112, 125, 133), for telling how one can be “happy” or “blessed” (Psalms 1, 32, 127, 128), and for promoting the “fear of the Lord” and reverence for his word (Psalms 19, 34, 37, 119).

A common denominator in these psalms is, again, the centrality of God. It is because the laws are from God that they are beneficial to his people. It is beneficial to do what is good and upright because those are characteristics of God, not because there is some intrinsic value to those qualities in and of themselves. For example, diligence and hard work over long hours might seem to be the “key” to success for many people. These certainly are noble traits to have; but Psalm 127:2 tells us that by themselves they are meaningless (“in vain”), because it is up to God alone to grant contentment. In Psalm 37, God’s people are advised to “trust in the Lord,” “take delight in the Lord,” “be still before the Lord,” and “wait for the Lord.” It is the Lord—and no one else—who grants possession of the land and makes it fruitful; it is the Lord who gives one confidence; and it is the Lord who saves the righteous from the wicked.

Conclusions

I remember as a teenager receiving a little book of inspirational quotations from my sister for my birthday. One quotation that came to be indelibly etched on my brain is attributed to a man named W. H. Preston. He said,

If God is not real, nothing matters.
If God is real, nothing else matters.

In my mind, this sentiment captures a foundational truth and assumption of every one of the 150 psalms in our Bible. Despite the great variety in this book—variety in terms of authors, in terms of feelings

expressed, in terms of historical situations, in terms of poetic forms—the one assumption tying all of the psalms together is God, who is, above all else, faithful and loving. The laments in the Psalms show us that we *can* turn to God in time of pain, because he loves us and will be faithful to be with us, as he promised. Also, they show us that we *should* turn to him alone, because he alone is God. No one else can comfort us as he can, and no one else can truly answer our prayers. Hymns of praise and thanksgivings are voiced because people recognize what God has done for them. They praise his lordship, because they see love, not tyranny, in the exercise of that lordship. They see a king who is faithful and just toward his subjects, even when they are not always faithful toward him. Wisdom psalms proclaim to others the

most meaningful insights about life that their writers have to offer—that God is, that he loves his people, and that he will faithfully be with them.

The Psalms convey the jubilation and the frustration, the fears and the desires, the understanding and the wonder, the joy of success and the heartache of failure of Israelite men and women from the days of Moses to the empires of the Persians and Greeks. Every one of them maintains the unswerving belief that a faithful God loves his people. Because of that, “nothing else matters” to them.

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Notes

¹See Pss 7, 22, 28, 31, 35, 43, 54, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 69, 71, 140, 142.

²See Pss 5:7; 13:5; 17:7; 57:3; 59:10; 61:7; 69:13,16; 86:5; 109:21; 143:8.

³See Pss 7, 22, 28, 31, 43, 54, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 69, 71, 109, 140, 142.

⁴An imprecation is a prayer that other people suffer in some way, e.g., Psalms 83, 109, 127, 137; also Jeremiah 11:18-20; 18:19-23; 20:7-18.

⁵See Pss 20, 61, 72, 122, 132; cp. Pss 2, 21, 45, 110.

⁶See Pss 29:10; 47:2; 93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1; 145:1.

⁷See Pss 8, 29, 33, 90, 93, 104, 148.

⁸Psalms 75, 76, 82, 96-99.

⁹See Pss 46-48, 81, 89, 95, 105, 106, 114, 135, 136.

¹⁰See also Pss 89:1-2; 92:2; 100:5; 106:45; 108:4; 117:1-2; 118:1-4, 29; 138:2; 145:8, 13.

¹¹See Pss 33, 47, 66, 96, 103, 105, 135, 145, 148.