SECOND EDITION

How to Read the Psalms

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Preface to the Second Edition

How to Read the Psalms was my second book, originally published in 1988 when I was thirty-five years old. I remember when Jim Sire, editor at InterVarsity and well-known author, visited Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, where I was teaching, soon after I arrived after finishing graduate school. I made an appointment with him, told him that I was interested in writing, and asked his advice. I will never forget what he said: "No one is interested in the Old Testament." Not the most encouraging advice, but he must have said something back at the home office because a month or two later, I got a letter (if it was an email it was pretty primitive) asking me to contribute to the How to Read series and to write a book on Psalms.

I am happy that *How to Read the Psalms* was well-received and outlasted the original series as a whole. Indeed, since that time I have written *How to Read Genesis* (2005), *How to Read Exodus* (2009), *How to Read Job* (2015, with John Walton), *How to Read Proverbs* (2002), and *How to Read Daniel* (2020).

I received much good advice from IVP people, particularly Jim Hoover and Dan Reid. The latter became my longtime editor at InterVarsity. I'm embarrassed that I didn't thank them as they deserve in the preface to the first edition. I was also remiss not to thank Derek Kidner (1913–2008), the eminent Psalms scholar, who served as an outside consultant to the book. But I thank them all now.

I want to thank IVP, and in particular Rebecca Carhart, for issuing the invitation to do a second edition. I am pleased that the book continues to be well-received in its English edition and that it has been translated into Korean, Chinese, and Spanish. I am hopeful that

How to Read the Psalms in the second edition will encourage the next generation of readers to understand and love this book of songs, poems, and prayers that bring us into intimate relationship with God.

As mentioned, I was thirty-five when the first edition appeared. I'll do the math: that was thirty-six years ago. I dedicated the first edition to my parents, who were younger in 1988 than I am now. They have since both passed away, and I dedicate the second edition to their memory.

Preface to the First Edition

The Psalter is one of the most familiar and most foreign of books in the Bible. It is familiar to us from constant exposure in both private and public devotional readings. It is foreign to us because of its poetic idiom and its implicit setting. It is my prayer that this book will help its readers understand the Psalter better.

I have had a broad readership in mind as I have written the book. I hope it can be used both inside and outside of an academic setting. I tried to make the book readable for the college student while still providing enough substance to make it appropriate for a seminary course on Psalms. I also hope that it will be studied by adult Sunday school classes as well as interested individuals.

Many chapters end with some questions for further thought and a bibliography. An answer key for the questions is provided at the end of the book. The last few chapters omit questions because their content is too involved for brief questions and answers. The further reading lists are intended for those who want to pursue the study of a particular subject further. Some books are marked with an asterisk to indicate that they are highly technical studies.

I want to take this opportunity to thank a number of individuals who gave me help while I was writing this book. Some of my colleagues at Westminster Theological Seminary took time from their busy schedules to read the manuscript and offer me constructive criticism. I would like to thank Drs. Raymond Dillard, Sinclair Ferguson, Moises Silva, and Bruce Waltke for their comments and encouragement. Professor Terry Eves of Calvin College also provided me with much helpful advice. My good friend and fellow elder at New Life Presbyterian

Church (Jenkintown, Pennsylvania), Mr. Richard Wyatt, also read the manuscript and provided me with comments on substance and style. While benefiting from their comments, needless to say, I accept full responsibility for any errors (particularly since I didn't act on all of their suggestions).

Most of all, I would like to express my thanks and affection to my wife, Alice, and my three children (Tremper IV, Timothy, and Andrew) for their support while I worked on this and other projects.

I dedicate this book to my parents, Tremper (Jr.) and Mernie Longman, for the loving way in which they raised me.

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The Genres of the Psalms

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;
    let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come before him with thanksgiving
    and extol him with music and song. (Ps 95:1-2)

Save us and help us with your right hand,
    that those you love may be delivered. (Ps 60:5)

You exalted me above my foes;
    from a violent man you rescued me.
Therefore I will praise you, LORD, among the nations;
    I will sing the praises of your name. (Ps 18:48-49)

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
    will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
    my God, in whom I trust." (Ps 91:1-2)

In these short quotations we glimpse the different *types* of poems encountered in the Psalter. In order of occurrence, we have an example from a hymn, a lament, a psalm of thanksgiving, and a psalm of confidence.

We don't have to know the Psalter very well to recognize that there are different types of psalms—roughly seven basic types, though

individual psalms can participate in more than one type. Before analyzing these types, however, it is important to realize that many differences occur between psalms of the same type. In other words, we must recognize *similarities* between psalms, not cloned repetition.

Psalms is not the only Bible book to raise the question of "type" of literature. We should ask the same question when studying any portion of Scripture. Thus, the following discussion applies to our reading of the entire Bible, though we will now focus on the Psalms.

WHAT IS A GENRE?

What we have been calling a *type* is more formally known as a *genre*.[1] *Genre* refers to a group of texts similar in their mood, content, structure, or phraseology.

We are all aware of various genres we are likely to encounter in our reading today. A current favorite form of recreational reading is the biography. Individual biographies have many differences, which isn't surprising since they describe the lives of dissimilar people, but each biography intends to depict the life of a particular individual.

Newspaper editorials reflect another commonly encountered genre. The list could go on and on. The textbook, the dissertation, the novel, the short story, the lyric poem, the instruction manual, the grocery list . . .

The Bible is a library of literary genres. The *letter* to the Ephesians, the *Gospel* of Mark, the *Revelation* of John, the *prophecy* of Isaiah, the book of *Chronicles*—this is just a sampling of the different types of literature found in the Bible.

We have already noted a few different types of psalms. Besides hymns, laments, psalms of thanksgiving, and psalms of trust or confidence, we will also discover psalms of remembrance, wisdom psalms, and kingship psalms.

WHY BOTHER WITH GENRE?

It might be surprising to realize that our interpretation of a text is to a great extent determined by our identification of its genre. "That's

impossible," some might say. "I have never identified a genre in my life!" Actually we identify genres every time we read.

In her book *Genre*, Heather Dubrow begins with an excerpt from a piece titled *Murder at Marplethorpe:*

> The clock on the mantelpiece said ten thirty, but someone had suggested recently that the clock was wrong. As the figure of the dead woman lay on the bed in the front room, a no less silent figure glided rapidly from the house. The only sounds to be heard were the ticking of that clock and the loud wailing of an infant.[2]

While reading, ask yourself: Who is the dead woman, and how did she die? Who is the silent figure? Why is the infant crying? What is the significance of the time?

The title is the main clue that this excerpt is from a murder mystery. Thus it is likely, especially if you are an avid reader of mysteries, that you have already identified the dead woman as the murder victim and suspect that the silent figure is the murderer. The baby is likely crying because the violent murder has awakened him or her. The clock's accuracy is significant because it marks the probable time of the murder.

Clear your mind of this story now, and read the same paragraph again, except this time under the title *The Personal History of David Marplethorpe*.[3] Ask yourself the same questions concerning the story, and you'll come up with different answers. Since biographies usually open with the birth of the hero, it is most likely that the baby is David Marplethorpe. The dead woman must be his mother who has tragically died in childbirth; the silent figure is probably the midwife leaving the scene. The time is the time of Marplethorpe's birth.

This rather lengthy example from Dubrow's book illustrates well the importance of genre identification. It determines the reading strategy of a particular text. If you think this brief story is a murder mystery, you will read it one way. If you think it is a biography, you will interpret it differently.

Genre identification may be conscious or unconscious, but in either case it shapes interpretation. When I pick up the newspaper in the

morning, I don't say to myself, "This is a newspaper, and as a newspaper I am reading someone's description and interpretation of the previous day's events. I will read it believing that the events reported are true (unless there is suitable contrary evidence), even if parts must be taken with a grain (or more) of salt." Though I don't consciously think this way, it is indeed the attitude with which I read the paper.

Most of the time we read the Bible without being conscious of our genre identification. For instance, we open to the book of Ezra and read:

> King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon. A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it:
>
> Memorandum:
>
> In the first year of King Cyrus . . . (Ezra 6:1-2)

The mention of the specific king, specific time, and the specific places leads us to believe we are reading history. This is a genre identification that most Bible readers make without reflection, and therefore do unconsciously.

In the same way as we begin to study Galatians, we read in the first verses:

> Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers with me,
>
> To the churches in Galatia. (Gal 1:1-2)

We immediately recognize that Paul is writing a letter.

We can see from these two examples how important genre identification is in our reading of Scripture. For instance, Galatians is a letter written to a particular first-century Christian community with specific problems. In his letters, Paul for the most part assumes rather than explains the problems he addresses. Once we recognize that we are reading a letter, it helps us understand why we often feel like we're

overhearing a conversation when we read a Pauline letter. We must reconstruct the issue Paul is addressing before we apply the contents of the letter to our own situation.

For instance, it is difficult to reconcile Paul's thought about the law of God in Galatians 3 with some of his comments in other epistles. The first step toward understanding this passage is to recognize that Paul is confronting a specific problem (the Galatians' tendency to depend on the law) rather than writing a systematic exposition of the relationship between the law and the Christian.

From our examples we may also see how many of the debates over the interpretation of Scripture are really debates over the identification of a text's genre. For instance, is the book of Matthew history in the sense that it imparts information to us about events that took place in time and space, or is it midrash (a kind of historical fiction)?[4] Is apocalyptic literature (for instance, Daniel and Revelation) composed of symbolic images, or is the beast really going to appear with seven heads and ten crowns?[5] These are genre questions.

APPLYING A GENRE FOCUS TO THE PSALMS

In the same way, it is important for us to ask about the genres of the psalms. Not only will genre help us in the interpretation of individual texts, it will also provide a convenient way for us to cover most of the Psalms without studying each of them individually. In other words, as we study a few examples of hymns in the Psalter, it will give us insight (not an exhaustive interpretation to be sure) into all of the hymns found there. While each hymn has its own character, it also shares many traits with others of its type.

Thus, we are now going to examine the major types of psalms. It must be admitted immediately, however, that the pie may be cut in many different ways. Scholars have suggested alternative ways to list the genres of the psalms.[6] Also, a psalm may be assigned to different levels of genre from specific to general. Indeed, a particular text might be seen to participate in more than one genre even on the same level

of generality. In other words, we need to be flexible as we speak of a psalm's genre.

Toward the pole of generality, all psalms are in the genre of poetry, but our discussion now will focus on a narrower level of genre. The seven genres this book describes are the hymn, the lament, the thanksgiving psalm, the psalm of remembrance, the psalm of confidence, the wisdom psalm, and the kingship psalm. These seven genres may be broken down further into even narrower genres.

This chapter intends to explain how the various genres of psalms may be recognized. The following chapters will deal with some of the interesting issues of interpretation and application of each of these genres.

MAJOR CATEGORIES: HYMNS, LAMENTS, THANKSGIVINGS, AND CONFIDENCE

Hymns, laments, as well as psalms of thanksgiving and confidence are the most frequently occurring types in the Psalter. They also form a relationship with each other in that hymns express joy when life is going well, and laments and sadness when trouble comes; thanksgivings are prayers when God answers laments, and psalms of confidence, prayers when he does not but a person has come to the point of trust in the midst of suffering. Walter Brueggemann well described the relationship between the first three as psalms of orientation (hymns), psalms of disorientation (laments), and psalms of reorientation (thanksgiving).[7] Glenn Pemberton brought the psalms of confidence into the conversation when he noted that they were sung if God did not answer the lament and the suffering continued.[8]

THE HYMN: PSALMS OF ORIENTATION

> Praise the LORD, my soul;
> all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
> Praise the LORD, my soul,
> and forget not all his benefits. (Ps 103:1-2)

Hymns are easily recognized by their exuberant praise of the Lord. The psalmist pulls out all the stops in his rejoicing in God's goodness. His praise is exuberant because the psalmist is very conscious of God's presence.[9]

Though there are many different types of hymns, almost all of them share a similar basic structure.

1. Hymns begin with a call to worship.
2. Hymns continue by expanding on the reasons why God should be praised.

The psalmist begins the hymn with a *call to worship*. Usually this call is extended to other worshipers, but occasionally (as in Ps 103 quoted above) it is a call to the psalmist himself to worship the Lord. A frequent opening to a hymn is the simple command to "Praise the Lord!" which in Hebrew is the familiar *Hallelu Yah*.

> Praise the LORD.
> Praise the LORD, you his servants;
> praise the name of the LORD. (Ps 113:1)

A variation on the theme of the call to worship is the simple assertion by the psalmist that he will offer praise to the Lord:

> It is good to praise the LORD
> and make music to your name, O Most High. (Ps 92:1)

The *reasons for praise*, however, form the most significant part of the psalm. God is not praised for abstract qualities, but rather for the way in which he has entered into the individual and corporate lives of his people.

It is often easy to spot the transition from the call to worship to the reasons for worship in a hymn because the latter is usually introduced by the Hebrew conjunction *ki* ("for," sometimes translated "because").

> It is good to praise the LORD. . . .
> *For* you make me glad by your deeds, LORD. (Ps 92:1, 4, italics added)

Sing to the LORD a new song. . . .
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps 96:1, 5, italics added)

The hymns may be further divided on the basis of the reason for the praise. For example, God is often extolled as the Creator:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. (Ps 19:1-4)

He is also praised as King (see below on kingship psalms):

God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets,
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises. (Ps 47:5-6)

An interesting twist is seen in the "Zion Songs," which extol Mount Zion not because of any greatness on its part (physically, it is rather unimposing), but because God has caused his presence to dwell there in a special sense in the temple.

Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy mountain.
Beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion,
the city of the Great King. (Ps 48:1-2)

The single most important reason for praise given by the psalmist is certainly that the Lord has delivered Israel out of distress. He has

redeemed her from her enemies. Accordingly, we will take a close look at a hymn of deliverance (Ps 98) in the final chapter.

THE LAMENT: PSALMS OF DISORIENTATION

As we turn to the lament, we go from the height of our relationship with God to its depths. The lament is the polar opposite of the hymn on the emotional spectrum.

Similar to the hymn, the lament genre is primarily defined by its mood.

> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
> Why are you so far from saving me,
> so far from my cries of anguish?
> My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
> by night, but I find no rest. (Ps 22:1-2)

The lament is the psalmist's cry when, in great distress, he has nowhere to turn but to God. We discover three types of complaints as we read through the laments.

1. The psalmist may be troubled by his own thoughts and actions.
2. He may complain about the actions of others against him (the "enemies").
3. He may be frustrated by God himself.[10]

It is widely accepted that Psalms 42 and 43 actually compose a single psalm. This theory is based on the refrain that unites them (Ps 42:5, 11; 43:5). Together these psalms illustrate all three types of complaints that can be seen in a lament. The psalmist is concerned about himself when he moans,

> Why, my soul, are you downcast?
> Why so disturbed within me? (Ps 42:5, 11; 43:5)

He also complains about his enemies:

> People say to me all day long,
> "Where is your God?" (Ps 42:3)

But most frightening to him is his sense of abandonment by God:

> I say to God my Rock,
> "Why have you forgotten me?" (Ps 42:9)

One of the difficult issues in interpreting the laments is the identity of the "enemies." Some scholars have taken them as the national enemies of Israel, others as "sorcerers," and still others as accusers in a legal case.

In most cases the references are vague, and we have every reason to believe they are so intentionally. The psalms are purposefully vague in reference to historical events so that they can be used in a variety of situations.

Besides mood, laments are also united by a similar structure. The following seven elements are associated with a lament, though not strictly in the order listed here:

1. Invocation
2. Plea to God for help
3. Complaints
4. Confession of sin or an assertion of innocence
5. Curse of enemies (imprecation)
6. Confidence in God's response
7. Hymn or blessing

Rarely will all seven elements occur together, but a number of them will appear in each lament.

The psalmist often begins with an *invocation* combined with a *plea to God for help*. There is no one the psalmist can turn to but God himself:

> Help, LORD, for no one is faithful anymore;
> those who are loyal have vanished from the human race.
> (Ps 12:1)
> Hear me, LORD, my plea is just;
> listen to my cry. (Ps 17:1)

Occasionally, the plea or petition will occur separately from the invocation (see the in-depth analysis of Psalm 69 in chapter ten).

The *complaint* is a focal point of the lament psalm because here we learn what has motivated the psalmist to prayer.

> But I am a worm and not a man,
> scorned by everyone, despised by the people.
> All who see me mock me;
> they hurl insults, shaking their heads. (Ps 22:6-7)

Though the mood of the lament is generally melancholic, there are one or two moments when the psalmist makes clear his basic trust in God. This is true of the section in which the psalmist expresses his confidence:

> Surely God is my help;
> the Lord is the one who sustains me. (Ps 54:4)

Since a lament predominantly reflects a downcast mood, it is surprising to note that all laments include some *expression of trust in God*.

The curse on the enemies (imprecation) is perhaps the most difficult part to reconcile with our feelings about God. A particularly hard-hitting imprecation is found in Psalm 109:

> May his days be few;
> may another take his place of leadership.
> May his children be fatherless
> and his wife a widow. (Ps 109:8-9)

A fuller discussion of the role of the curse in the Psalms may be found in chapter ten in connection with Psalm 69.

Laments may be further divided on the basis of whether the psalmist *confesses his sin* in the context of his suffering or, the opposite, *protests his innocence*.

> You, God, know my folly;
> my guilt is not hidden from you. (Ps 69:5)
> I abhor the assembly of evildoers
> and refuse to sit with the wicked. (Ps 26:5)

As Christians, we resonate with the confession but find the psalmist's assertion of innocence almost presumptuous. We are offended by the latter because we think of Paul's strong statements on the total sinfulness of men and women (Rom 3:9-20). But we must remember that there are occasions when people are persecuted or harassed in situations or for reasons for which they are totally innocent. Assertions of innocence do have a proper place in the context of prayer.

Last, *hymns of praise* are common toward the conclusion of a lament. As the psalmist realizes what God can and will do for him, it leads him to praise God:

> My feet stand on level ground;
> in the great assembly I will praise the LORD. (Ps 26:12)

The transition from complaint to praise is often so abrupt that many scholars feel that laments presuppose the presence of a priest. As the primary setting of the Psalms is in the formal worship service, the priest would hear the complaint and then respond with an assurance of pardon and God's help. This assurance would allow the psalmist to respond in joy. The priest's statements, so the argument runs, were not recorded in the psalm. This reconstruction seems possible but not provable, though the important point to notice is that sorrow turns to joy in most laments.

While most laments shift from sadness to joy and confidence without explanation, there is at least one that gives the reason for the change of heart. Psalm 77 begins with lament:

> I cried out to God for help;
> I cried out to God to hear me.
> When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
> at night I stretched out untiring hands,
> and I would not be comforted. (Ps 77:1-2)

The psalmist expresses his inner turmoil through most of the psalm, even charging God with betraying his promises to take care of him (Ps 77:7-9). But in verses 13-15, he praises God:

Your ways, God, are holy.
What god is as great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. (Ps 77:13-15)

The shift in attitude comes as the psalmist reflects on God's "mighty deeds" (Ps 77:12) and in particular on the crossing of the Sea at the time of the exodus from Egypt (Ps 77:16-20). In the midst of his distress, he remembers that his God is one who can rescue people when they are beyond human help. This gives the psalmist confidence to live in a troubled present as well as hope for the future.

We should also remain mindful that some laments end not with praise or confidence but rather in pain. Psalm 88 is a prime example, when the psalmist concludes not with joy but with "you have taken from me friend and neighbor—darkness is my closest friend" (Ps 88:18).

As we read a psalm, we are often able to differentiate individual laments from national laments. To do so helps us to reconstruct how the psalm was understood by the ancient Israelites. Psalm 83 is without a doubt a national lament. The enemy is a coalition of nations seeking to destroy Israel.

Most laments are individual in the sense that the psalmist speaks in the first-person singular *I*.

I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.
Arise, LORD!
Deliver me, O my God!
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
break the teeth of the wicked. (Ps 3:5-7)

On the surface, Psalm 3 appears to be a true individual lament. However, in another sense it is actually a community lament. The *I* is David, the

king of Israel. As king, his enemies are the community's enemies. Psalm 3 was probably primarily used in the context of Israel's battles against foreign incursion.[11]

THANKSGIVING PSALMS: PSALMS OF REORIENTATION

A review of the lament form in the Psalter naturally leads to a consideration of songs of thanks. The lamenter sometimes explicitly promises his thanks if God will hear his voice:

> I am under vows to you, my God;
> I will present my thank offerings to you. (Ps 56:12)

Further, the praise of God that is found in so many laments anticipates that God will hear and answer the psalmist's urgent plea for help. When he does, the psalmist lifts his voice once again to offer thanks.

The desire to express gratitude to the Lord for answered prayer is frequently seen in the Psalter and occasionally in the historical books. For example, Hannah prays for a son and promises that she will "give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head" (1 Sam 1:11). Hannah fulfilled her obligation of thanks to God when she gave Samuel to Eli.

The thanksgiving psalm is a response to answered lament. In addition, there is a close connection between hymns and thanksgivings. The relationship is so close, in fact, that Westermann has argued well that thanksgiving is really a subcategory of praise.[12] A thanksgiving psalm is praise to God for answered prayer.

A typical thanksgiving *begins in a similar way to a hymn of praise*. The psalmist declares his intention to praise God:

> I will extol the LORD at all times;
> his praise will always be on my lips. (Ps 34:1)

Some thanksgivings, however, begin with a blessing:

> Blessed is the one
> whose transgressions are forgiven,
> whose sins are covered. (Ps 32:1)

The psalmist, thanking the Lord for answered prayer, bears witness to God's great work in his life. He even calls on the rest of the congregation to join him in thanking the Lord:

> Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people;
> praise his holy name. (Ps 30:4)

The thanksgiving is most easily identified by a *restatement of the lament*, which is now answered:

> The cords of the grave coiled around me;
> the snares of death confronted me.
> In my distress I called to the LORD;
> I cried to my God for help. (Ps 18:5-6)

This, then, is followed by an account of God's salvation. In the case of Psalm 18 this deliverance is presented in a dramatic picture of the appearance of God as a warrior who "reached down from on high and took hold of me" (Ps 18:16). The remainder of the thanksgiving psalm continues to praise the Lord and to call on others to praise him.

PSALMS OF CONFIDENCE

The psalmist frequently expresses his trust in God's goodness and power. His confidence in God is present as he sings hymns of joy (Ps 46) and as he mourns (Ps 3:3-6; 52:8). Occasionally, his feelings of trust dominate the whole psalm, and these psalms we call psalms of confidence.

At least nine psalms (Ps 11; 16; 23; 27; 62; 91; 121; 125; 131) are bound together in such a genre. Tone and content, rather than structure, bring them together.

In psalms of confidence the psalmist asserts his trust in God, though an enemy or some other threat is present (Ps 11:2; 23:5). Under such conditions, he is able to be at peace because his God is with him (Ps 11:4; 23:4).

These psalms contain striking metaphors that show an intimate awareness of God's presence on the part of the psalmist. God is the

psalmist's refuge (Ps 11:1; 16:1), shepherd (Ps 23:1), light (Ps 27:1), rock (Ps 62:2), and help (Ps 121:2).

The submissive trust the psalmist puts in the Lord is nowhere more movingly expressed than in Psalm 131:

> But I have calmed and quieted myself;
> I am like a weaned child with its mother,
> like a weaned child I am content. (Ps 131:2)

Brueggemann insightfully describes the relationship between hymns (orientation), laments (disorientation), and thanksgiving (reorientation) psalms. Thanksgiving psalms are sung when God answers lament. But God does not always answer our laments, so Glenn Pemberton asks what happens if God remains silent and suffering continues.[13] Granted, the sufferer might and should continue to pray laments if that reflects their heart. After all, see how the darkest lament is written from the perspective of someone attests that "from my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terror and am in despair" (Ps 88:15).

That said, Pemberton rightly says that someone who continues to suffer can rather sing a song of confidence in God while in pain or facing threats. Psalm 23 is such a psalm, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> Even though I walk
> through the darkest valley,
> I will fear no evil,
> for you are with me;
> your rod and your staff,
> they comfort me.
> You prepare a table before me
> in the presence of my enemies.
> You anoint my head with oil;
> my cup overflows. (Ps 23:4-5)

MINOR CATEGORIES

Hymns and laments, as well as psalms of thanksgiving and confidence, are the most numerous types of poems in the book. As explained above, they also relate to one another in terms of the ups and downs of life. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a time in life where people wouldn't find themselves in a place where more than one of these categories captured their present situation and mood.

The following three types of psalms (remembrance, wisdom, and kingship) are less frequent (especially the first two). In addition, they can overlap with the first four categories. A kingship psalm might be a hymn (e.g., Ps 47) or a lament (Ps 89).

Psalms of remembrance. The Psalms do not have a specific historical setting. Nonetheless, they frequently make reference to the great redemptive acts of the past. Two events particularly are cited often: the exodus, which could be called the paradigm salvation event of the Old Testament (Ps 77:16), and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty through covenant (Ps 89 and 132). In many psalms, only one event will be cited.

Psalms of remembrance are those in which God's past acts of redemption are the focus of attention. In such psalms, a series of God's acts will be recounted. Examples of this genre are Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136.

These psalms are united in their subject matter, the "wonderful acts" of God (Ps 105:2). Nowhere in the Bible is history reported only to impart historical information, but this is especially true in the Psalms. Rather, God's acts are recounted so that Israel might thank him:

> Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name;
> make known among the nations what he has done.
> (Ps 105:1)

Psalm 136 is unique in the Bible due to its recurrent refrain, "His love endures forever." Each verse brings a past act of God's redemption to remembrance. This is followed by the refrain. For instance, see verse 13:

To him who divided the Red Sea asunder
His love endures forever. (Ps 136:13)

Psalm 78 moves beyond praise and explicitly uses redemptive history to instruct future generations how to act:

Then they [future generations] would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands. (Ps 78:7)

Wisdom psalms. In thinking of biblical wisdom, we normally turn to books like Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. In these books we read in concrete ways how God wants us to live our lives. They reveal God's will in the nitty-gritty and difficult areas of our lives.

Certain themes emerge from these books that students of the Bible recognize as especially (though not exclusively) related to wisdom. Some of these themes are also prominent in certain psalms we label the wisdom psalms.

The wisdom books of the Bible emphasize a contrast in ways of living that bring about different consequences. On the one hand, there are wicked men who are cursed of God, and on the other hand, there are righteous men on whom God grants his blessing (for example, read Prov 8 and 9). Such a contrast is also clear in Psalm 1:

Blessed is the one
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. . . . (Ps 1:1)
For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. (Ps 1:6)

Proverbs in particular is devoted to spelling out the alternatives between wicked (foolish) and righteous (wise) behavior. In this we may see a close connection with law. A few psalms meditate on the beauty and wonder of the law of God:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul.

> The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
> making wise the simple. (Ps 19:7)[14]

Psalm 119 is perhaps the best-known example, devoting 176 verses to extolling God's law.

The wise men of Israel were also fascinated with the order of God's world as manifested in his creation. We have already mentioned those psalms that reflect on God's creation under the general category of the hymn, but it is also appropriate to see their connection with wisdom psalms:

> The heavens declare the glory of God;
> the skies proclaim the work of his hands. (Ps 19:1)

In addition, one strain of wisdom thought deals with the more skeptical side of life and faith. Job wrestles with the difficult issue of the suffering of an apparently righteous man, and Ecclesiastes deals with the doubt of a wise man gone bad.

The psalmist who composed Psalm 73 echoes momentarily this doubting strain when he questions God about the wicked who "have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong" (Ps 73:4).

Even the Song of Songs, that provocative hymn of praise to God for intimate human love, has an analog in the Psalter. Psalm 45 revels in the marriage of the king (and thus can also be considered a kingship psalm).

> All glorious is the princess within her chamber;
> her gown is interwoven with gold.
> In embroidered garments she is led to the king;
> her virgin companions follow her—
> those brought to be with her.
> Led in with joy and gladness;
> they enter the palace of the king. (Ps 45:13-15)

Kingship psalms. The kingship psalms may also be profitably read as a separate genre, though kingship psalms also participate in one of the first four types (hymn, lament, thanksgiving, confidence). Two groups of kingship psalms must be distinguished. First, we have in the Psalter

a number of psalms that focus on the human king of Israel. The content of these psalms varies greatly. Psalm 20 calls a blessing down upon the king; Psalm 21 expresses the king's thanks and trust in the Lord. Psalm 45 (which we have already seen in another connection) rejoices in the king's wedding. The royal aspect of the psalm may not be readily apparent, because the king may refer to himself as *I* rather than as *the king*. Psalm 89 laments God's abandonment of the Davidic king.

The second group of kingship psalms proclaim that God is king. The two subgroups are closely related because, after all, the human king was simply God's earthly reflection. God was the true king!

> For God is the King of all the earth;
> sing to him a psalm of praise. (Ps 47:7)

Many divine kingship psalms praise God as king in connection with military victory and may also be studied as Divine Warrior hymns, as we will shortly see in Psalm 98.

CONCLUSION

Hymns, laments, thanksgivings, psalms of confidence as well as psalms of remembrance (sometimes called redemptive-historical psalms), wisdom psalms, and kingship psalms—what an incredible variety of songs Israel sang to her God! Nearly every psalm in the Psalter can be understood within these categories.

A word of caution, however. Genres are not written on tablets of stone; they are flexible. The Psalms may be profitably studied under more than one of our stated genres. Psalm 45 is a kingship psalm, wisdom psalm, and hymn. Psalm 78 is both a psalm of remembrance and a wisdom psalm:

> I will open my mouth in a parable,
> I will utter hidden things, things from of old. (Ps 78:2)

But the point is well established. The psalms are not completely isolated from one another but have many features in common. There is no such thing as a completely unique psalm!

The identification of the basic genres of psalms leads us to the question of their use or function in ancient Israel. How did our spiritual predecessors, the Israelites, use the Psalms? This is the subject of the next chapter, and it will give us clues to the relevance of the Psalms in our lives today.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PSALM STUDY

1. Consciously make a decision about the genre of a passage of Scripture as you read it.
2. Be flexible in your understanding of a text's genre. More than one category may be applicable.
3. While reading a hymn, look for the word *for* or *because*. Here we usually can find the reasons for praise.
4. As you study a hymn, list the psalmist's reasons for praise.
5. In a lament, identify the object of the psalmist's complaint. Does he focus on himself, his enemies, or God?
6. Examine the structure of a lament for the presence of the seven "building blocks" (invocation, plea, complaint, expression of confidence, confession of sin or assertion of innocence, imprecation, hymn, or blessing) that often occur in laments.
7. Study a lament carefully to determine whether it is the cry of an individual or the community.
8. Once you've identified a thanksgiving psalm, try to understand the prayer (usually a quoted lament) that has been answered.
9. In a psalm of confidence, identify the factors that threaten the psalmist's well-being.
10. Identify the images of God the psalmist uses to communicate his confidence in God as he faces trouble.
11. A psalm of remembrance is one in which the mighty acts of God are recounted. As you read a remembrance psalm, list the mighty acts of God and read about these events in the historical books of the Bible.
12. Since there is a strong connection between the Wisdom books and the Psalms, ask yourself if wisdom themes—like creation

order, law, or the contrast between the righteous and the wicked—are present in the psalm you are studying.

13. Examine a psalm to see if the king is speaking the prayer or is the object of prayer.

EXERCISES

1. Identify the genres of Psalms 34, 55, 85, 95, and 135.
2. Examine the structure of Psalm 54 closely. What kind of psalm is it? How can you tell from its structure?
3. Not all the psalms fit neatly into a clear category. Read Psalm 40 closely. What genres can you associate it with?
4. Read Psalm 82 closely. With which genre(s) would you associate it?

FURTHER READING

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*Throughout the Further Reading lists, asterisks are used to indicate highly technical studies.