

The Movement and Message of the Hebrew Psalter



**AN OVERVIEW ON WHAT IT MEANS TO READ
THE BOOK OF PSALMS AS A BOOK**

WEEK ONE

A GLIMPSE BACK, A VISION FORWARD

A Glimpse Back



• **Class Goals**

- To move beyond devotional reading of the Psalms, toward reading the collection as a purposefully arranged Book
- To give you an overview of what that kind of reading entails
- To give you the tools necessary to read this way on your own

• **Class Schedule**

- This week – Background Issues, Poetry, and Theology
- Next week – Using the Analogy of a Jigsaw Puzzle
- Remaining three weeks – Moving from book to book in the Psalter to discover its meaning as a book, and what message it has for us today

A Glimpse Back



- **Online resources**

- <http://www.andywittonline.com>
- A link in the top-left corner for “Salt and Light Institute”
- There you will find all the handouts I refer to in class, as well as the mp3s of the class and powerpoint files
- If you do not have access to the internet, or have no idea what I’m talking about, then we can arrange another way to get the material for you
- Talk to me after class

Current Trends



- **Form-Genre Criticism**

- Chief Players: Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel
- This is most common approach to the Psalm study today
- Main idea: To organize the psalm by their literary type/genre in relation to their life situation (German, *Sitz im Leben*)
 - ✦ Gunkel located the situation in the historical events of post-exilic Israel, from Ezra and Nehemiah down to the Macabbean period
 - ✦ Mowinckel in the temple activities of pre-exilic Israel, mainly their enthronement feasts and seasonal ceremonies
- Problem: most of the *Sitz im Leben* is purely speculation

Current Trends



- **Canonical-Compositional Approach**
 - Chief Players: Brevard Childs and Gerald Wilson
 - This approach is beginning to gain a lot of ground, especially amongst scholars of my generation and little bit older
 - Main idea: See the Psalter as organized and arranged by its final editor, having meaning related to its textual shape (*Sitz in Text*)
 - ✦ Trying to understand the book as it is, looking for literary clues and editorial activity that get us closer to the final author's intent
 - ✦ The final context for the psalms is their place in the Psalter, not their use beforehand
 - This class is a commentary on this approach

Current Trends



- **Summary**
 - Devotional and Christological Reading (from before Christ)
 - ✦ Devotional reading = the speaker in the Psalms is yourself
 - ✦ Christological reading = 1) the psalmist is Christ, 2) one of the characters in the psalm is Christ, or 3) the psalm is about Christ
 - Form-genre Criticism (late 1800's)
 - ✦ Organizes the psalms based on "genre" and their function in the religious institutions of ancient Israel
 - Compositional Criticism (pre-Reformation, again in 1980's)
 - ✦ Emphasis on the rhetorics of Hebrew poetry within each psalm
 - ✦ Emphasis on how each psalm functions with the book of Psalms, rather than its "historical" or "social" function in ancient Israel
- **This class will move from Composition to Messianic to Devotion**

Guidelines for our Approach



- **Messianic**
 - The overriding subject of the grand narrative of the Bible is the Son of God and his mission
- **Mimetic**
 - The world of the Bible is the real world
 - We are to apply our world to the Bible, change our perceptions
- **Canonical**
 - The Bible is intentionally and intelligently designed – its themes and contents cohere together and are connected
- **Confessional**
 - Our reading is always kept in check by the Gospel of Jesus Christ

A Glimpse Back



- **What book are we reading?**
 - “Psalms” vs “Praises” vs “David” vs “Psalter” vs “The Blessings of the Man”
- **What are *psalms*?**
 - Two downloads – “Psalm Terminology” and “Poetic Analysis”
- **Who wrote the psalms?**
 - David
 - The Sons of Korah
 - Asaph
 - The Ezrahites, Heman and Ethan (Jeduthun?)
 - Solomon
 - Moses

A Glimpse Back



- **When were the psalms written?**
 - As far back as Moses (1500-ish BC)
 - Some psalms are clearly post-Babylonian exile (400s BC)
 - Most are written around David's time (1000-ish BC)
- **Why were the Psalms written?**
 - We get a clue by looking at how the Bible itself uses them
 - They are used for singing in worship
 - ✦ 1 Chr. 16; Eph 5.18; Col 3.16; Acts 16.25; Jam 5.13
 - They are used in reference to the Messiah, esp. in the NT
 - ✦ Mk 12.36 and Mt 22.43; Rom 11.9-10; Heb 11.32-34
 - ✦ Luke 24:44-49 --- one of the keys to our reading!

A Vision Forward



- **Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (pg 64)**
 - "The most exuberant, extensive, and expansive indicators of who and what God is, and what God is about, are found and elaborated in the hymns and songs of thanksgiving that the people of Israel and individuals in that community uttered again and again in the course of Israel's history."
- **James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns* (pg 69)**
 - "The psalms understand praise as response, the poetry of revelation."
- **Sameul Terrien, *The Psalms* (pg 24)**
 - "Theology begins and ends in doxology."
- **Robert Cole, class notes**
 - "The Psalter does not simply express emotion through lyrical poetry but principally theology."

A Vision Forward: Poetry and Prophecy



- **Where did the connection come from?**
 - The word for “to prophesy” is the same word for singing and playing instruments
- **The idea of a “new song”**
 - We find reference to a new song in Ps 33.3; 40.4; 96.1; 144.9; and 149.1
 - We also find reference to a new song in Revelation 5.9-10; 14.3
 - Main point: Not an original composition, but a Song of the New Age

A Vision Forward



- **Music and prophecy are united quite often**
 - 1 Chronicles 25.1
 - 1 Samuel 10.5-6
 - 1 Samuel 16.23
 - 2 Samuel 22-23
 - 2 Kings 3.15
- **Other ancient examples**
 - Exodus 15
 - Deuteronomy 31.28ff
 - Isaiah 5

A Vision Forward: The Point



- The Psalter can biblically be viewed as a Book primarily concerned with a prophetic vision of the future
- It was not meant for our entertainment, but for our edification and wisdom as we respond to God's plans for the future of His creation
- John Sailhamer, *Biblical Prophecy* (pg 63)
 - "The book of Psalms as a whole...has a plot structure and a central theme, which are focused on the prophetic hope of the coming Messiah. When the music stops and the speaking begins, we hear the theme of the Davidic covenant. The narrator, as it were, is reminding the reader of what the book of Psalms is all about --- the coming Messiah."