

Psalms: Psalm 4, Hebrew Poetry, and Psalm 23

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Session 5

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Psalms, Bruce Waltke, Psalm 4, Hebrew poetry, parallelism, Robert Lowth, James Kugel, Psalm 23, nephesh, exegesis

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke completes his verse-by-verse exposition of Psalm 4, highlighting its structure, historical Davidic context, and themes of trust amidst adversity. He then provides an in-depth examination of the nature, extent, and mechanics of Hebrew poetry, contrasting Robert Lowth's traditional view of synonymous parallelism with the modern insights of James Kugel and Robert Alter. The lecture concludes with a detailed poetic and theological analysis of Psalm 23, tracing its three distinct imagery scenes from pasture to tent to temple. Throughout the session, Waltke emphasizes the hermeneutical importance of recognizing poetic figures of speech and interpreting the Old Testament Psalms through a Christological lens.

Outline

I. Exposition of Psalm 4 (Continued)

A. Overview and Structure of Psalm 4

1. Superscript Analysis and Historical Setting

- a. Definition of superscript (prose historical context above the poem)
- b. Genre as a psalm (mizmor: song accompanied by musical instruments)
- c. Reconstructing ancient music: Susanna Hauk-Ventura's 1979 accents theory (hand signals on scale of E)
- d. Davidic authorship: 14 of 73 Davidic superscripts link to specific historical incidents in 1 & 2 Samuel

2. Four-Part Structural Division of Psalm 4

- a. Part I (pp. 30–31): Address to God with Introductory Petitions
 - i. Petition to gain an audience and find God's favor
 - ii. Request to escape distress (leadership losing faith)
- b. Part II (pp. 31–34): Address to the Highborn Apostates
 - i. Poetic apostrophe as literary device to communicate truth
 - ii. Accusation: turning glory into shame and pursuing false gods
 - iii. First admonition: know your king (validated by prophet, spirit, and works)

- iv. Three pairs of admonitions (7 imperatives):
 - (A) Pair 1: Tremble/shake in fear of apostasy's doom (rigzu vs. Eph 4:26 anger)
 - (B) Pair 2: Search your heart on your bed and be silent (conscience in quiet solitude)
 - (C) Pair 3: Offer righteous sacrifices and trust in I AM (praise as sacrifice)
- c. Part III (pp. 34–35): Petitions by People and King
 - i. People's prayer for divine favor ("show us good")
 - ii. King's prayer for spiritual joy exceeding harvest abundance
- d. Part IV (pp. 35–36): Confidence and Praise to God
 - i. King resolves to sleep in peace and safety despite unanswered crisis
 - ii. Supporting cross-references (Isaiah 26:3, Psalm 21:7, Philippians 4:6–7)
 - iii. Practical illustration: student experiencing peace in Vietnam battlefield

II. Introduction to Hebrew Poetry

- A. Importance of Understanding Poetic Style and Genre
 - 1. Essential requirement of understanding author's style for proper interpretation
 - 2. Contrast between prose narrative and poetic discourse
- B. Extent of Poetry in the Old Testament
 - 1. Approximately 50% of the Old Testament is written in poetic form
 - 2. Major poetic collections: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and all prophetic literature
 - 3. Theological implication: God is aesthetic and chooses poetry as a primary revelation medium

III. Nature, Definition, and Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

- A. Formal Definition of Poetry
 - 1. Barbara Herrnstein Schmidt's definition: restricted speech, sustained rhythm, continuous operating organization
- B. Three Primary Restrictions/Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry
 - 1. Parallelism as Primary Organization Principle
 - a. Absence of phonetic rhyme and unknown meter in Biblical Hebrew
 - b. Parallelism delivers complex message "stereophonically" across lines
 - 2. Extreme Terseness and Compression
 - a. Omission of grammatical particles, focus on paragraph and vivid imagery
 - b. Prose as motion picture vs. poetry as a series of vivid slideshow pictures
 - c. Case study comparison: Jael and Sisera in Judges 4 (prose) vs. Judges 5 (poetry)
 - 3. Heightened Style, Concrete Imagery, and Figures of Speech
 - a. Non-literal communication demanding figurative analysis
- C. Hermeneutical and Canonical Implications
 - 1. Interpretation of prophetic and poetic texts vs. prose narrative

2. Numbers 12 analysis: Moses' direct, clear revelation vs. prophetic visions and riddles
3. Priority of Christ's interpretation over prophetic and apocalyptic figures (e.g., millennium)

IV. Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry: Historical Models and Shifts

A. Robert Lowth's Foundational Model (1753)

1. Concept of restatement: B verset as shadow of A verset ("swan and shadow")
2. Lowth's Three Basic Classifications of Parallelism:
 - a. Synonymous parallelism (referring to same linguistic referent, e.g., Ps 2:5)
 - b. Antithetical parallelism (contrasting propositions, e.g., Ps 1:6)
 - c. Synthetic parallelism (building upon or completing the initial thought)
3. Structural Terminology: Stich/Colon, Bicolon, Tricolon, Hemistich

B. Post-1980 Paradigm Shift: James Kugel and Robert Alter

1. Rejection of synonymous restatement as a "disastrous effect" on biblical criticism
2. Concept of "Statement and related/emphatic statement" (A, plus what's more, B)
3. B verset reinforces, defines, particularizes, or expands A ("goose and gander")
4. Exegetical and Gospel applications:
 - a. John 19:24: dividing garments vs. casting lots for cloak (Ps 22:18)
 - b. Matthew 21:1–5: riding on a donkey AND on a colt (Zech 9:9)
 - c. Psalm 2:5: rebuke (God's act) vs. terrify (human dread)

C. Structural Mechanics: Continuous Dichotomy and Accentuation

1. Athnac accent as primary verse divider into A and B versets
2. Binary subdivisions (AA, AB, BA, BB)
3. Example analysis: Isaiah 53 (figurative root out of dry ground vs. literal physical appearance)

V. Exposition and Poetic Analysis of Psalm 23

A. Translation and Lexical Studies

1. Psalm (mizmor) as stringed instrument song
2. Definition of soul (nephesh): passionate vitality, drives, and appetites in OT vs. NT tripartite view

B. Three Primary Vignettes / Scenes

1. Scene 1 (vv. 1–4a): Shepherd and Sheep in Pasture (provision, restoration, protection)
2. Scene 2 (v. 5): Sheikh and Guest in Tent Banquet (refreshment, honor amidst enemies)
3. Scene 3 (v. 6): Temple and Eternal Dwelling with I AM (the ultimate reality behind figures)

C. Poetic Dynamics and Transitions

1. Address shifts: speaking about God to congregation vs. speaking directly to God
2. Janus transition in verse 4 bridging pasture imagery to direct prayer

D. Canonical and Christological Conclusion

1. Jesus Christ as Good Shepherd, Chief Shepherd, and ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 23