

Psalms: The Theology and Form of Psalms

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke explores the structural and theological framework of the Psalms of praise (hymns), distinguishing them from songs of grateful praise (todah) and petitionary psalms. He examines the three primary motifs of hymns—the call to praise, the cause for praise, and the concluding hallelujah—while interacting with Hermann Gunkel's form criticism and the temple setting (Sitz im Leben) of Israelite worship. Waltke highlights how universal calls to praise connect the Psalter to the Abrahamic Covenant, the redemptive mission to all nations, and the New Testament church. Finally, he outlines God's incommunicable attributes (aseity, eternity, omnipotence) and communicable attributes (mercy, grace, patience, steadfast love, and faithfulness from Exodus 34:6) as the foundational theological fuel for authentic praise.

Outline

I. Context and Methodological Approaches to the Psalms

A. Review of the Historical Approach

1. Trustworthiness of Davidic superscripts (73 psalms explicitly attributed to David)
2. Royal interpretation: The 'I' who speaks in the Psalms represents the King / Son of David
3. Christological trajectory: Jesus as the ultimate Son of David, and believers praying in Christ

B. Review of the Form Approach and Hebrew Poetry

1. Characteristics of Hebrew poetry: Terseness and heightened figurative language
2. Parallelism: Stereophonic presentation of truth giving complementary angles (e.g., Psalm 2)
3. Figurative imagery illustrated in Psalm 23 (Sheep/Shepherd, Sheik's tent/Host, Temple/House of Yahweh)
4. Metaphorical nature of theological language: God as Father and creator

C. Form Criticism and Settings in Life (Sitz im Leben)

1. Hermann Gunkel's form criticism and searching for setting in life (Sitz im Leben)
2. Origin of temple hymns and David's role as poet laureate preparing temple songs
3. Institutional transition: Handing personal petitions over to the director of music for corporate worship

4. Five basic psalm types according to Gunkel vs. 1 Chronicles 16:4 threefold biblical classification (Lehaskir/petition, Lehadot/thanks, Lehalel/praise)

II. Distinction Between Types of Praise

A. General Praise (Hymns)

1. Focus on God's nature, communicable/incommunicable attributes, and broad historical acts in Israel
2. Universal and broad thematic scope

B. Grateful Praise (Todah / Thanksgiving)

1. Focus on specific, individual answers to prayer and deliverance from distress
2. Hebrew concept of Todah: Public confession and testimony of God's direct intervention, not private 'thank you'

III. Structure and Motifs of the Hymn (Psalms of Praise)

A. Call to Praise (Introduction / 'The match that ignites the fire')

1. Imperative mood: Command to praise Yahweh
2. C.S. Lewis's defense against divine narcissism: Praise as the natural, spontaneous delight in what is admirable
3. Mood of enthusiasm: Expressed through music, instruments, bodily movement, and vibrant participation

B. Performers and Participants of Praise

1. Levitical guilds and choirs (e.g., Sons of Korah, Asaph, Miriam leading praise)
2. Requirement of moral purity: God rejects hypocritical praise from the wicked (Psalm 50)
3. Universal scope: Calling all nations, creation, and Gentiles to praise Israel's God
4. Redemptive-historical connection: Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1–3), spiritual seed of Abraham, and 1 Peter 2:9–10
5. Individual call: Self-exhortation ('Praise the Lord, O my soul')

C. Cause for Praise (Body / 'The fuel that feeds the fire')

1. Theology learned through enthusiastic worship rather than dry systematic analysis
2. Evaluating academic literature: Evangelical appraisal vs. non-evangelical presuppositions

D. Concluding Hallelujah (Conclusion)

IV. Theological Content of the Hymns (Cause for Praise)

A. Incommunicable Attributes of God

1. Aseity: God's self-existence, uncreated nature, and ultimate reality
2. Eternality and Immutable Power: Creator and Sustainer of all life
3. Holiness, omniscience, and supreme majesty over creation

B. Communicable Attributes of God (Exodus 34:6)

1. Divine disclosure at the Golden Calf incident
2. Mercy (Rachamim): Maternal-like compassion for the helpless
3. Grace (Hananim): Unmerited favor and kindness

4. Patience (Erech Apayim): Long-suffering nature

5. Steadfast Love (Hesed) and Faithfulness (Emet): Unfailing covenant loyalty and truth

C. Subtypes of Praise Psalms

1. Songs of Zion: Celebrating God's dwelling place in Jerusalem

2. Enthronement Psalms: Celebrating Yahweh's reign as King