

Psalms: Theology of Psalms

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke explores the theology of the hymn form in the Psalms, emphasizing how doxology functions as a primary context for learning about God's character and attributes. He distinguishes between God's incommunicable and communicable attributes, addressing the concept of God's incomparability and clarifying why biblical references to other gods reflect religious realities rather than henotheism. Waltke further examines how Hebrew poets adapt ancient Near Eastern creation motifs—such as the battle against chaos (Chaaskampf)—to assert Yahweh's ultimate sovereignty over creation, kingship, and the temple. Finally, he unpacks the covenantal meaning of hesed (unfailing love) and highlights Israel's unique historical orientation towards God's redeeming acts compared to surrounding pagan cultures.

Outline

I. Introduction and Form of the Hymn in Psalms

A. Motifs of the Hymn

1. Introductory call to praise (the spark that ignites praise)
2. Cause for praise (the fuel that furnishes praise)
3. Renewed call to praise

B. Nature and Performance of Praise

1. Praise as fitting, right, and essential for human life and spiritual health
2. The posture of praise: enthusiastic, fervent, non-lukewarm worship with music, singing, and clapping
3. The performers of praise: God's covenant people (praise from unrepentant sinners is an abomination to God)

II. Doxological Theology and the Attributes of God

A. Learning Theology through Doxology

1. Theology learned through the inspired praises of pious worshippers rather than direct prophetic dictation
2. Human words of praise directed to God returning as God's inspired word to humanity

B. Incommunicable Attributes (Attributes Unique to God)

1. Divine Aseity (self-existence, self-derivation, absolute independence)
2. God vs. materialistic creation views (creation finely tuned, intelligent, and comprehensible)
3. Consequences of rejecting God's eternal power (divine withdrawal, surrender to sin, and spiritual death)

C. Communicable Attributes (Moral Attributes Shared with Humanity)

1. Revealed in Exodus 34 following Israel's apostasy with the golden calf
2. Key attributes: mercy, grace, long-suffering, unfailing love (hesed), and total fidelity
3. Essential balance: omnipotence combined with mercy prevents despotism or powerless sentimentality

III. The Incomparability of God and the Problem of Henotheism**A. Biblical Expressions of Divine Incomparability**

1. Psalmic assertions such as 'Who is like you among the gods?' and 'King of gods'

B. Refutation of the Evolutionary Henotheism Model

1. Rejection of comparative religion models (Animism → Polytheism → Henotheism → Monotheism)

C. Distinction Between Theological Statements and Religious Realities

1. Theological reality: Only one true God exists (Deuteronomy 4:39)
2. Religious reality: People manufacture and worship false gods/idols, which have no actual divine existence

IV. Anthropomorphic and Figurative Language for God**A. Necessity of Metaphor in Divine Revelation**

1. Human language about spiritual realities is inherently metaphorical and accommodative
2. Use of ancient three-tiered cosmology (heavens, earth, waters below) as a visual framework

B. God's Heavenly Enthronement and Omniscience

1. God sitting on a heavenly throne signifies universal rule rather than spatial restriction
2. Peering down from heaven visually communicates divine omniscience and active oversight

V. God as Creator and Sustainer of Nature**A. Continuous Creation and Divine Preservation**

1. God's ongoing providential care sustaining all living creatures (Psalm 104)
2. Ancient perspective: no distinction between preservation and new creative acts

B. Manifestation of God in Natural Forces

1. Light, clouds, wind, lightning, and seasons as active manifestations of God's power and presence

VI. Covenantal Love (Hesed) and Faithfulness

A. Definition and Dynamics of Hesed

1. Help rendered to the helpless out of love, kindness, and covenant commitment
2. Involves a covenant relationship where the stronger party meets the desperate need of the weaker party

B. Old Testament Exemplars of Hesed

1. Joseph requesting his family to carry his bones back to Canaan
2. Ruth's sacrificial loyalty to Naomi and Machlon's family legacy, rewarded through Boaz

C. Theological Significance

1. God's unyielding loyalty to the Abrahamic covenant guarantees ultimate victory over death

VII. Ancient Near Eastern Motifs and Creation Theology (Chaoskampf)

A. Poetic Adaptation of Pagan Myths

1. Hebrew poets utilizing themes from Babylonian (Enuma Elish) and Ugaritic mythology
2. The Chaoskampf motif: heroic deity defeating chaotic waters/monsters (Tiamat, Yam, Rahab, Leviathan)

B. Polemic Function of Mythological Allusions

1. Poetic personification used as a polemic to demonstrate Yahweh's victory over pagan gods
2. Sublimities falsely attributed to Baal or Marduk belong exclusively to Yahweh

C. The Triad of Creation, Kingship, and Temple

1. Subduing chaotic waters establishes Yahweh's reign and holy temple (Psalm 93)
2. Psalm 29 appropriating Canaanite storm imagery to proclaim Yahweh's supreme power over Baal's domain

VIII. Divine Revelation in History vs. Pagan Mythology

A. Israel's Historical Orientation

1. God revealing Himself through historical acts (Exodus, wilderness wanderings, conquest)

B. Uniqueness of Biblical Historiography

1. Contrast with Egyptian, Babylonian, and Ugaritic cyclical views lacking historical direction
2. Biblical history moving purposefully toward an eschatological climax of universal divine rule