

Psalms: Pagan Imagery, Zion, and Psalm 100

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke examines the theological and literary dimensions of praise in the Old Testament, focusing on how biblical poets adapted pagan creation myths as literary allusions to exalt Yahweh over chaos. He contrasts Canaanite Baal worship on Mount Zaphon with Israel's worship of Yahweh on Mount Zion, highlighting the polemical nature of Israel's Psalms of Zion. Moving to Psalm 100, Dr. Waltke analyzes its structure, revealing an alternating pattern of calls and causes for praise centered on a chiasmic pivot that affirms Yahweh's supreme deity and covenant relationship with His people. Finally, he offers a line-by-line exposition of Psalm 100, exploring key Hebrew terms, the theological weight of the divine name, and the enduring role of praise and liturgy for the Church today.

Outline

I. Pagan Imagery and Creation in OT Songs of Praise

A. Doxological Theology and the Call to Praise

1. Learning theology best through praise and worship rather than static abstraction
2. The praises of God's people as the Word of God teaching doxological theology

B. Adapting Pagan Creation Myths as Literary Allusion

1. Depicting Yahweh's creation as triumph over chaotic forces (tehu vabohu / tehumi / tiamat)
2. Genesis 1:1 as a summary statement of initial organized creation (heavens and earth)
3. The chaotic state in Genesis 1:2 and the hovering Spirit/Wind of God (parallel to Genesis 8:1)
4. Light triumphing over darkness: darkness as the absence of light without inherent power
5. Personification of sea and chaos (Rahab, Leviathan, Yam)
6. The movement of redemptive history: from primordial sea/darkness to the eschaton where no sea or darkness remains
7. Literary allusion vs. belief: Israel's security in the Mosaic covenant allowed bold poetic use of pagan motifs

II. The Polemic of Mount Zion versus Mount Zaphon

A. Canaanite Mythological Background

1. Mount Zaphon (Mount Cassius in Syria) as the dwelling place of Baal and the Ugaritic pantheon

2. Canaanite deity characteristics: Baal, and Anat as the epitome of sex and violence
3. The distinction between "holy" (kaddish / set apart to deity) and "profane" (profanum / outside the temple)

B. Psalms of Zion as a Direct Polemic

1. Yahweh choosing Mount Zion by sovereign grace rather than nature worship
2. Psalm 48:2 framing Mount Zion as "the heights of Zaphon" to assert Yahweh's ultimate supremacy
3. Essential contribution of Ugaritic literature to understanding the Zion tradition

III. Literary Structure and Setting of Psalm 100

A. Expository Context and Musical Setting

1. Psalm 100 integrated into forthcoming commentary (The Psalms as Christian Wisdom and Christian Praise with Jim Houston)
2. Superscript analysis: a psalm for giving grateful praise accompanying sacrifice
3. The role of stringed instruments and music in engaging emotions and preparing the heart for worship

B. Two-Stanza Alternating Structure

1. Stanza 1: Call to Praise (vv. 1–3a) and Cause for Praise (v. 3b)
2. Stanza 2: Call to Praise (v. 4) and Cause for Praise (v. 5)

C. Rhetorical Chiasm of Seven Imperatives

1. Matching opening and closing commands (e.g., Hebrew verb for "come" in v. 2 matches "enter" in v. 4)
2. The Chiastic Pivot / Central X (v. 3): "Know that Yahweh, He is God; He made us and we are His people"
3. Application to the Church: believers as Abraham's seed and the present-day mediatorial kingdom

IV. Detailed Line-by-Line Exposition of Psalm 100

A. Exposition of Stanza 1 (Verses 1–3)

1. "Shout to I Am, all the earth"
 - a. Ruach / Shout: exuberant enthusiasm, trumpet blast, battle alarm, and victory shout
 - b. The Divine Name I Am (Yahweh): eternal, unchanging, yet continuously revealing Himself in history
 - c. Analogy of the Trinity as a triadic chord (C-E-G); Jesus as the full revelation of I Am
 - d. "All the earth": Israel chosen not to exclude, but as a mediator to include all nations
2. "Serve I Am with rejoicing"
 - a. Serving Yahweh as Master through temple labor, praise, and prayer
 - b. Polemical commitment: rejecting alternative loyalties and false realities
 - c. Simcha / Joy: outward, physical expression (leaping, clapping, dancing) vs. mere internal disposition

3. "Come before Him with a joyful shout"

- a. Ubiquitous presence of God (Psalm 139) vs. His unique benedictory presence in corporate worship

B. Exposition of the Chiastic Pivot (Verse 3)

- 1. Knowing Yahweh alone as God (Elohim as the quintessence of divine nature)
- 2. Knowing our identity as His formed people
 - a. Election of Abraham and spiritual adoption
 - b. Four essential constituents of a nation: a common people, common law (written on the heart), common land (fulfilled in Christ), and common ruler (Jesus Christ)
- 3. Sustaining faith through the power of the Word of God and the testimony of the Church

C. Exposition of Stanza 2 (Verses 4–5)

- 1. "Enter His gates with grateful praise... Bless His name"
- 2. "For I Am is good; His unfailing love endures forever, His reliability throughout all generations"