

Psalms: The Petition Psalms: Lament, Enemy, and Motifs

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke explores the petition psalms—the largest genre in the Psalter—focusing on form-critical analysis, individual versus communal laments, and the theological significance of human distress and complaint in the life of faith. He examines how individual laments function across various life settings (including temple worship, distance from the sanctuary, sickness, and penitence) and analyzes the portrayal of enemies through military, hunting, zoomorphic, and moral imagery. Waltke critiques historical-critical theories regarding the identity of the psalmist and enemies, such as Hermann Gunkel's psychological/second-temple theories and Sigmund Mowinckel's magical-spell interpretation, advocating instead for a Davidic/royal context. Finally, the lecture details the structural motifs of petition psalms—address, lament, petition, confidence, and conclusion—highlighting how prayer transforms doubt into triumphant faith.

Outline

I. Introduction and Overview of Psalm Types

A. Four Main Categories of Psalms (Expanding Gunkel's Threefold Classification)

1. Hymns (General praise of God)
2. Grateful praise (Praise for specific acts of deliverance, e.g., Psalm 92)
3. Petition psalms (The dominant genre within the Psalter)
4. Instruction psalms (Exhortations to meditate on and abide in the law of the Lord, e.g., Psalm 1)

B. Structure and Division of the Lecture

1. Part One: Introduction, nomenclature, individual/communal laments, enemies, and motifs
2. Part Two: Imprecatory Psalms (prayers for judgment against enemies and contrast with NT teaching)
3. Part Three: Summary of the theology of Petition Psalms

II. Individual Laments and Their Life Settings

A. Identification and Prevalence of Individual Laments

1. Represent approximately 50 out of 150 psalms (roughly one-third of the Psalter)

2. 47 of these 50 petition psalms explicitly mention enemies
3. Theological significance of lament (R. W. L. Moberly): distress is central, not a sign of deficient faith
4. The necessary gap between virtue and reward: immediate rewards lead to using God for self-gratification (Deut. 8)
5. Contrast between biblical lament (always joined with praise) and Job's initial complaint (lacking praise)

B. Identification of the Speaker ('I')

1. Refutation of 19th-century collective theories viewing 'I' as personifying the nation
2. Gunkel's proof that 'I' refers to an individual, though missing the primary royal context
3. The 'I' as the King standing in corporate solidarity with the community

C. Eight/Nine Life Settings of the Individual Laments

1. General difficulty of identification due to figurative and metaphorical language
2. Worship and prayer at the Temple (e.g., Psalm 5, Psalm 28, Psalm 141, Psalm 4)
3. Sung at a distance/exile from the sanctuary (e.g., Psalms 42–43 in the northern Jordan region)
4. Situations where enemies surround or taunt the psalmist outside the sanctuary
5. Composed on a sickbed (e.g., Psalm 38)
6. Critical life-and-death crises
7. Awareness of personal sin and penitence (e.g., Psalm 38, Psalm 90)
8. Internal distresses, longing for God, or being on trial

D. Communal Laments

1. Shared national distress where the entire community seeks God's intervention
2. Interplay between 'I' and 'we' explained by royal corporate solidarity

III. The Enemy in the Petition Psalms

A. Terminology and Moral Characterization

1. Frequent use of moral designations (villains, impudent, arrogant, violent, deceitful, shifty, liars)
2. Spiritual warfare context: earthly struggle reflects cosmic conflict between justice and injustice

B. Modes of Portrayal

1. Battlefield imagery (military troops, bows, arrows, swords, surrounding armies)
2. Hunting imagery (secret nets, dug pits, traps in animal pathways)
3. Zoomorphic/animal imagery (roaring lions, enraged bulls, biting dogs)
4. Crooked ways, secret plots, and disdainful words
5. Direct opposition to God

C. Critical Theories vs. Evangelical/Royal Interpretation

1. Sigmund Mowinckel's theory: evil workers interpreted as sorcerers/magicians casting spells

2. Hermann Gunkel's theories:
 - a. Late dating to Second Temple period (denying Davidic/royal authorship)
 - b. Reinterpretation of military imagery as common citizens' metaphors
 - c. Attribution of enemy descriptions to physical sickness, paranoia, or psychological neurosis
 - d. Class warfare theory (pious = poor; wicked = rich)
3. Waltke's critique: higher-critical presuppositions distort the text and ignore spiritual understanding

IV. Structural Motifs of the Petition Psalms

A. The Five Core Motifs

1. Address (Summons to God)
2. Lament / Complaint (Expression of distress)
3. Confidence (Expressions of faith based on God's character and past deeds)
4. Petition (Direct requests for hearing, vindication, and deliverance)
5. Conclusion (Vow of praise or declaration of certainty)

B. Common Sub-Motifs of the Lament

1. Sense of God's absence or abandonment (e.g., Psalms 10:1, 22:1)
2. Overwhelming power and number of enemies
3. Personal helplessness and proximity to death

C. The Petition and Its Juridical Character

1. General plea for God to hear, awake, and consider the case
2. Plea for deliverance (Yahshua): carries both military intervention and juridical rightness
3. Duty of the sufferer to cry out to activate justice (analogous to OT legal requirements)
4. Confessional petitions (seeking forgiveness) vs. protest petitions (asserting innocence)

D. Foundations of Confidence

1. Knowledge of God's holy and righteous nature
2. Remembrance of God's past acts and personal experience of deliverance
3. Identity and election as God's anointed servant/child

E. The Conclusion and the Transformation of Prayer

1. Sudden transition from anxiety to absolute certainty of being heard
2. Explanations for the shift: critique of priestly oracle theory vs. psychological/spiritual victory of faith