

Psalms: Sacred Sites, Seasons, Objects, and Personnel

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Bruce Waltke explores the role and multifaceted functions of the ancient Israelite cultus in the Book of Psalms, focusing on sacred sites, seasons, objects, and personnel. Waltke examines Psalm 73 to demonstrate how entering the sanctuary transforms a believer's perspective from a temporal, limited worldview to an understanding of God's eternal victory and sovereign guidance. He details the four primary functions of the cultus—typical, exemplary, sacramental, and artistic/propagandistic—and shows how King David expanded Mosaic ritual into full musical worship centered at Jerusalem. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how the earthly temple and its worship serve as a replica, metaphor, and foreshadowing of heavenly reality fulfilled in Christ and the Church.

Outline

I. Introduction & Perspective Shift in Psalm 73

A. The Psalmist's Three Steps Down Away from Faith

1. Step 1: Viewing life through 'keyhole theology' (envying the prosperity of the wicked; defining God by the problem).
2. Step 2: Envying the ungodly and making temporal prosperity an idol.
3. Step 3: Almost losing a foothold in covenant faith and trust in God.

B. The Turning Point: Entering the Sanctuary of God

1. Moving from temporal frustration to divine revelation.
2. Understanding the final destiny of the wicked through temple symbolism.

C. The Psalmist's Seven Steps Back Up to High Faith

1. Refusing to teach a false philosophy that God rewards evil.
2. Entering the sanctuary to encounter God in crisis.
3. Grasping the ultimate judgment and end of the wicked.
4. Recognizing personal ignorance and former 'brute beast' mentality.
5. Acknowledging God holding the psalmist's right hand.
6. Trusting God's counsel to guide through life into ultimate glory.
7. Desiring God alone above all earthly riches in heaven and earth.

II. Four Major Functions of the Israelite Cultus

A. Exemplary and Typical Function

1. Synchronic dimension: Earthly sanctuary as a copy and replica of heavenly spiritual reality.
2. Diachronic dimension: Foreshadowing and type fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Church, and future resurrected glory.

B. Sacramental Function

1. Physical acts, sacrifices, and sacred meals providing true spiritual communion and forgiveness.

C. Artistic and Propagandistic/Communicative Function

1. Architecture and visual forms as powerful media communicating divine authority, permanence, and endurance.
2. Historical and modern parallels: Cathedrals, Washington D.C. classic architecture, and Enlightenment university libraries.

D. Songs of Zion as Architectural and Spiritual Proclamation

1. Exposition of Psalm 48: Celebrating Mount Zion, citadels, ramparts, and victory over hostile kings.
2. Allusions to Ugaritic/Canaanite myths (Mount Zaphon) reclaimed for Yahweh's supreme dwelling.

III. Historical Evolution: Mosaic Cultus to Davidic Temple Cultus**A. The Mosaic Period Cultus**

1. Mobile sacred site (Tabernacle/Tent) without a fixed geographical location.
2. Sacred objects (Ark, ephod, Urim and Thummim) and primary annual feasts (Passover, Pentecost, Sukkot).
3. Sacred personnel restricted to Aaronite priests and Levites.
4. Sacrificial rituals largely lacking prescribed musical or poetic librettos.

B. The Davidic Transformation of the Cultus

1. Centralized sacred site established at Jerusalem (Mount Zion).
2. Transformation into 'opera': Adding grand staging, formal liturgy, and Psalter music/libretto.
3. Expansion of sacred personnel to include the Davidic King and Temple Prophets (e.g., Psalm 50).

C. Rhythms of Worship: Chronic vs. Critical Cultus

1. Chronic cultus: Regular annual feasts, monthly new moons, weekly Sabbaths, and daily morning/evening sacrifices.
2. Critical cultus: Special assemblies convened during national crises (war, famine, plague, drought; 1 Kings 8).
3. Role of Wisdom/Sages: Priestly instruction at the temple integrating wisdom perspectives (e.g., Psalm 73).

IV. Aspects and Dimensions of the Cultus in the Book of Psalms**A. Spatial Distinction: Inside vs. Outside the Temple**

1. Within the temple: Sacred, holy, eternal, infinite, and perfect presence of God.
2. Outside the temple (profane): Temporal, finite, passing, imperfect, and sinful world.

B. Sacred Sites and Psalms of Zion

1. Transcendence of Yahweh: Electing Zion by sovereign choice rather than endemic constraint.
2. Psalm 46: God as refuge, fortress, and ever-present help in Zion.
3. Qualifications for sanctuary entrance: Psalm 15 ('David's Ten Commandments') requiring integrity, truth, and righteousness.

C. Sacred Seasons and Calendar Liturgies

1. Sabbath (Psalm 92), New Moon (Psalm 81), and Morning/Evening sacrifice prayers (Psalms 3–6).
2. Levitical choir and orchestra ministry instituted by David (1 Chronicles).

D. Sacred Actions and Liturgical Movements

1. Sacred offerings and thank-sacrifices (Psalms 96, 107, 116).
2. Prophetic oracles issued from the sanctuary (Psalm 50).
3. Processions around the altar and tribal entry processions (Psalms 26, 68).
4. Pilgrimage experience and Songs of Ascent (Psalms 84, 120–134; Psalm 122).

E. Sacred Objects

1. Sacred altar, cup of salvation, military banners (Psalm 20), and orchestra instruments (Psalm 150).

F. Sacred Personnel

1. Heavenly hosts/angels, priests (house of Aaron), Levites, Davidic King, army, and God-fearing worshippers.

V. Theological Applications and Discussion

A. Theomorphic Nature of Humanity and Metaphorical Architecture

1. Human senses and bodily structure given as metaphors reflecting God's seeing, hearing, and personal nature.
2. Earthly temple and Christian church architecture as visual symbolisms shaping theological understanding.

B. Architectural Symbolism and Worship Focus

1. Placement of pulpit, lectern, and communion table reflecting the centrality of Scripture vs. Christ's sacrifice.

C. Formality in Old Testament Cultus vs. New Testament Worship Liberty

1. Specific divine definition in Old Testament worship versus broad spiritual principles in the New Testament.
2. Illustrative ministry anecdote: Cultural expression and spontaneous order among Louisiana indigenous believers.