

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Session 28,

Editing of the Whole Psalter

20-min. Podcast Audio Overview

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Welcome back to the Deep Dive. You ready to dive into something pretty amazing today? Always. Today we're going to be looking at the Book of Psalms.

Okay. But with kind of a twist. Right.

We're not going to be focusing so much on the content of the Psalms. Okay. We're going to be looking more at how this book came together.

Interesting. And the source material for our Deep Dive today is a lecture by Dr. Bruce Waltke. Okay.

And the things that he brings out in this lecture are pretty amazing. I bet. It's like we're getting a backstage pass to see how the book was put together.

Right. And the way that it was put together actually gives us even more insight. Right.

Into what the songs themselves are telling us. I like that. So first things first.

Sure. The Book of Psalms has gone by a few different names. It has.

It has. Over the centuries. Yeah.

What's the original Hebrew? So the original Hebrew title is Sefer Tehillim. Okay. Which literally means Book of Praises.

Okay. So, Book of Praises. Yes.

But then when it was translated into Greek, it took on a slightly different connotation. Yeah. It became Psalmoi in Greek.

Psalmoi. Which is more of a hymn kind of vibe. More hymns.

Yes. Okay. And then finally, we get to the Latin Liber Psalmorum.

Liber Psalmorum. Which is where we get our English name Psalms from Book of Psalms. So we see how the name evolved a little bit.

It did. Okay. Yes.

But the question is, how do we get from all these individual psalms that were written at different times by different people for different purposes to this collection that we now call a book? Right. And Dr. Waltke uses a very beautiful analogy to describe this. Okay.

He says, imagine individual raindrops. Okay. Each one is unique.

Yeah. Beautiful in its own way. But then as they fall, they gather into streams.

Okay. Those streams become rivers. And ultimately, all those rivers flow into this vast interconnected sea.

Oh, wow. That's a great analogy. And that's how he sees the formation of the Book of Psalms.

I love it. Yeah. So we have these individual psalms.

Yes. Many of them were written for temple worship, right? Yes. Many of them were composed specifically for that purpose.

Like the Psalms of David. Exactly. So many of those came out of a time of personal crisis.

Yes. Very much so. Then what happened? Well, many of them, even the deeply personal ones, were adopted for temple use.

Okay. You can imagine even David's laments, which are so raw and personal. Right.

Being handed over to the chief musician and becoming part of the communal worship experience. So the chief musician was like the conductor back then. Precisely.

Like a modern-day conductor leading the orchestra and singers. And some historical records even indicate that they may have used hand signals. That's right.

Kind of like a modern conductor would. To direct the musicians. Isn't that fascinating? To imagine an ancient orchestra performing these powerful psalms with hand signals guiding every note.

Yeah. And crescendo. Absolutely.

It really brings those ancient worship services to life. Oh, I love that. Yeah.

Okay. So we have these individual psalms. Some of them were then adopted for temple use.

Right. But then things get even more interesting. They do.

Because they start to be grouped together. Yes. It's like these ancient librarians were given this treasure trove of spiritual poetry.

And they had to figure out the best way to organize it all. Right. So one way they did this was by grouping them by author.

Okay. That makes sense. Like David, the Sons of Korah, Asaph, even Moses.

Okay. But they also grouped them by genre. By genre.

Yes. And I have to admit, some of these genres sound a little mysterious. They do.

They do. Like Mismore? Mictom?

Yes. Maskell. Maskell.

Very interesting one. What are these? Well, Mismore is simply a psalm. Okay.

It's the default genre, you could say. Okay. But Mictom is more like an inscription, perhaps engraved on a monument or something.

Right. And then Maskell. Yeah.

This is the interesting one. Okay. It comes from a root word that means to make prudent or to make skillful.

So a how-to psalm. Exactly. A guide for wise living, if you will.

Wow. So each genre has its own unique purpose and style. Okay.

Adding to the richness and diversity of the Psalter as a whole. That is so cool. It is.

Now, I will admit. Yeah. When we get to this thing called the Elohist Psalter.

Ah, yes. This is where I started getting a little- a little lost. Yeah.

The Elohist Psalter has puzzled scholars for centuries. Okay. Basically, it's Psalms 42 through 83.

Right. And they use the word Elohim for God much more often than Yahweh. Okay.

Which is the more common name in the rest of the Psalms. So to be honest, I've always thought of God and Lord as interchangeable. But you're saying that there's actually a- there is.

There's a deeper meaning behind this word choice. Absolutely. Okay.

You see, Yahweh emphasizes God's covenant relationship with Israel. His personal name that he revealed to Moses. Okay.

It highlights God's closeness and faithfulness to his people. Okay. So Yahweh is more personal.

Yes. More personal. And Elohim is.

Elohim points to God's transcendence, his power and majesty as ruler of the entire universe. No. It's the more generic word for God.

Okay. Used even by other cultures. I see.

And the subtle shift in the Elohist Psalter- yeah. Might be a clue about the historical context in which these songs were written. So it's not just different names; it's different aspects- it does.

God's character. Exactly. That is being emphasized.

Mm-hmm. And this change is consistent. It is.

Throughout Psalms 42 to 83. Yes. Consistently.

Okay. And there's even more to it. There is.

There are two Psalms. Okay. Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 that are almost word-for-word identical.

But one uses Yahweh and the other uses Elohim. Yes. Scholars call these synoptic Psalms.

So they basically copied and pasted a whole Psalm. Pretty much. And swapped out the name for God.

It's like the editors wanted to highlight this shift in focus to make us pay attention to the different nuances of these divine names. And this leads to another fascinating detail. Oh.

The Elohistic Psalter contains exactly 42 Psalms. It does. And it starts at Psalm 42.

42 Psalms starting at Psalm 42. Coincidence. I don't think so.

Okay. So what's so special about the number 42? Well, in ancient Near Eastern literature, the number 42 often shows up in contexts of judgment or premature death. Oh.

For instance, remember the story of Elisha and the two bears? They mauled 42 children who mocked the prophet. Right. And then there's another account where Jehu, a king of Israel, had 42 Judeans killed.

So the number 42 has some pretty dark connotations. Yeah, it does. You're saying that this might be a hint about the historical situation? It could be.

Reflected in the Elohistic Psalter. It's a possibility. Okay.

Many scholars believe that the Elohistic Psalter might reflect a time of national crisis. Okay. Perhaps even the destruction of the First Temple.

Right. And the exile of the Israelites to Babylon. During that time, they would have felt a real sense of abandonment.

Absolutely. A sense of despair. Yeah.

And questioning why God seems so distant. Exactly. If you're going through a horrific experience like exile, it's natural to focus on God's transcendence.

Right. His power and sovereignty over all things. Rather than his intimate presence.

Yes. It's like crying out to the God of the universe. Yeah.

Seeking a bigger perspective amidst the chaos. And even though there's a lot of lament and despair. Yes.

In the Elohistic Psalter. Yes. There's also this glimmer of hope.

There is. There is. Woven throughout.

Yes. It's like they're clinging to the belief that even in exile, even when it feels like God is far away. Right.

That his power and justice ultimately prevail. That blend of despair and hope is what makes the Psalms so relatable. It is.

Even thousands of years later. Absolutely. Okay.

So we've got grouping by author. Yeah. Grouping by genre.

This whole Elohistic Psalter thing going on. Right. What other methods do these ancient editors use? Well, they also grouped them based on shared themes.

Okay. Metaphors. Even the time of day they were likely sung.

Oh, like a spiritual playlist. Exactly. Like creating a playlist for your spiritual journey.

Can you give me some specific examples? Absolutely. Take Psalms three through six. Okay.

They alternate between prayers for morning and evening, perhaps reflecting the rhythm of daily sacrifices at the temple. So it's like a soundtrack for their daily devotion. Precisely.

Guiding them through the highs and lows of each day. Yes. And the more you look, the more of these subtle connections and patterns emerge.

Okay. For example, Psalms seven through nine. Yeah.

Are linked by their focus on praising God's name. This makes sense when you consider how the ancient Hebrew mind worked. Okay.

Remind me, how did the ancient Hebrew mind work? They love to group things based on conceptual relationships. Conceptual relationships. Like? Think about the Hebrew alphabet.

Okay. The letters aren't arranged randomly. Right.

They're grouped according to the body parts they represent. Okay. Hand, head, and so on.

So they were applying that same thought process to the arrangement of the Psalms. Precisely. Like they're using the structure itself to reinforce the message.

Oh, that's brilliant. We see other clever techniques throughout the Psalter. Songs 103 and 104 have similar endings.

Right. Creating a sense of continuity. Then you have unique titles like the Songs of Ascents.

Right. Which were likely sung by pilgrims as they journeyed up to Jerusalem for the festivals. Right.

And there are even catchphrases or repeated lines that link different Psalms together. It's like a giant literary puzzle. Yeah.

With each piece carefully placed to create a larger, more meaningful whole. Okay. So we've got individual Psalms evolving into temple songs.

Right. They're grouped by author, genre, divine name. Yes.

All these mind-blowing techniques. Yeah. But ultimately, they all come together into five distinct books.

That's right. Five books, just like the five books of the Torah. Okay.

Also known as the Pentateuch or the Law of Moses. Why five? Well, the evidence for this five-book structure is pretty compelling. Okay.

What kind of evidence? Each book ends with a unique doxology. A doxology? A short statement of praise to God. Think of it like a grand finale at the end of a symphony.

Oh, like a "praise the Lord" kind of thing. Exactly. But they're not generic.

Okay. Each book's doxology is different, suggesting they were carefully chosen to mark the conclusion and highlight specific themes. Another piece of evidence is the changes in authorship at the seams between the books.

Okay. It's like each book represents a distinct section of the overall psalter. So it's not just a random collection.

No. It's five distinct books. Yes.

Each with its own character and purpose. But why five? What's the significance? The rabbis, who were ancient Jewish scholars, saw a beautiful parallel between the five books of the Torah given by Moses and the five books of Psalms traditionally attributed to King David. So just as Moses gave the people God's law, David is giving them God's songbook.

Exactly. It's a beautiful connection. I love that.

Yeah. But Dr. Walke also suggests that there might be a deeper layer to this five-book structure. Yes.

A royal focus. A royal focus woven throughout the entire Psalter. Okay.

And the evidence is quite fascinating. Lay it on me. First of all, the very first psalm, Psalm 2, is a coronation liturgy.

Coronation what? Liturgy, meaning it was used in ceremonies where kings were crowned. Oh, wow. It's a powerful declaration of God's chosen king who will rule over all the nations.

And it sets the stage for the rest of the Psalter. Right. Which is filled with references to kingship.

Okay. Both earthly and divine. So from the very beginning, the psalter is hinting at this theme of kingship.

It is. It is. Okay.

And it doesn't stop there. Okay. Book one is almost entirely composed of Davidic psalms.

Okay. Highlighting his role as the model king of Israel. Right.

Then book two ends with a note about David's prayers. Okay. And a psalm focused on Solomon, his son and heir.

Right. It's like they're emphasizing the Davidic dynasty, the lineage of kings chosen by God. But history tells us that the Davidic kings weren't always successful.

That's true. There were times of rebellion, exile, even the complete collapse of the kingdom. Yes.

And that's reflected in the psalms as well. Oh, wow. The emotional arc of the Psalter gets really interesting.

As you move through the five books, you can sense a growing despair. A sense of things unraveling. Right.

And this culminates in book three. Yeah. Which is often considered the darkest book of the Psalter.

The darkest book. Yes. It ends with a lament over the failure of the Davidic covenant.

The shattering of God's promises to David's lineage. So the Psalter is not just a collection of happy songs. It is not.

It reflects the full spectrum of human experience. It does. Included the darkest moments of doubt and despair.

Precisely. And that's what makes it so powerful. Yeah.

It acknowledges the pain and suffering of life without shying away from it. Right. But it also offers a path through the darkness.

Okay. A way to find hope and restoration. So how does that path unfold? Well, remember the psalms often move from lament to praise.

Yeah. Reflecting a journey from despair to hope. So how does that play out in the final two books? Well, the shift to Moses in book four is significant.

Okay. Remember, Moses was the one who led Israel out of Egypt. Right.

The one who received the law on Mount Sinai, going back to Moses. It's like the editors are reminding us. Okay.

That even when human covenants fail. Yeah. God's faithfulness endures.

He's still in control. Okay. Even when things seem chaotic.

So it's like hitting the reset button. Yeah. Going back to the foundational figure.

Right. Who reminds us of God's power and faithfulness throughout history. Precisely.

And within book four, we see this emergence of what are called enthronement psalms. Enthronement psalms. That celebrate God's reign and ultimate victory.

These psalms remind us that even in exile. Yeah. Even when earthly kingdoms crumble.

Right. God's kingdom remains unshakable. So even when things look bleakest, the psalms point to a king.

Yes. Whose power transcends earthly circumstances. That's right.

A king who can't be dethroned or defeated. Exactly. And then book five.

Yes. Picks up on this theme of redemption and restoration. It does.

It begins with a beautiful call to give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever. Wow.

Echoing the closing prayer of book four. It's like a seamless transition. It is.

Carrying us from lament and despair to a renewed sense of hope and trust in God's goodness. And it's within book five that we find some of the most well-known messianic psalms. Oh, really? Including Psalm 110.

Okay. Which speaks of a king who will rule from sea to sea. Wow.

A king whose dominion extends to the ends of the earth. So the arrangement of the psalms is not just random. No.

It's intentional. Very much so. It's purposeful.

Yes. It's telling a story. It is telling a story.

And that story ultimately points us to the hope of a future king. Yes. A Messiah.

The Messiah. Who will usher in a reign of peace and righteousness. That's the ultimate hope.

Wow. The psalms are sounding more and more like a prophetic book. They are.

But before we get too far ahead of ourselves. Yeah. Dr. Walt Ken mentioned something that really threw me for a loop.

Okay. He talks about a psalm scroll found at Qumran. Yes.

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls sites. One of them. That actually has a slightly different arrangement.

It does. And even includes extra psalms. Yes.

The 11QP scroll. Okay. It's a fascinating discovery.

So the Dead Sea Scrolls, as you might know. Yeah. Were a collection of ancient Jewish texts.

That's right. Found hidden in caves. Yes.

Near the Dead Sea. And this particular scroll. Yes.

Suggests that other Jewish communities, yeah. Might have had slightly different versions of the Psalter.

That's a possibility. So maybe there wasn't just one official version. There might have been some flexibility.

Yeah. In how the psalms were arranged. And which ones were included.

It's really interesting to know. It is. That there are variations.

That the process of canonization wasn't always neat and tidy. Right. But ultimately, the version we use today.

Yes. The Masoretic Text. Is the one that became the standard.

It is the standard. And Dr. Waltke suggests that it is the final form of the Psalter. Yeah.

Likely took place in the synagogue. It's very possible. Where it was used for communal prayer.

Meditation and reflection. So the Psalms were transitioning from being primarily used in the temple. Right.

To becoming a resource for personal and communal devotion. Exactly. And that makes them even more relevant for us today.

Okay. So what does this all mean for us? Well, I think the main point is that the arrangement of the Psalms is intentional. Purposeful.

Incredibly insightful. Right. It's not just a random collection of poems.

It's a carefully crafted tapestry. Right. Weaving together themes of lament and praise.

Kingship and exile. Right. Despair and hope.

And by understanding how those pieces fit together. We can gain a deeper appreciation. Absolutely.

For the message of the Psalms. It's like seeing a beautiful mosaic for the first time. Okay.

You can appreciate the individual tiles. But it's only when you step back.

Yeah. And see the whole picture. Right.

You grasp the full beauty and power of the artwork. And the Psalms aren't just beautiful. No.

They're incredibly relevant to our lives today. Precisely. They reflect the human experience in all its complexity.

Yeah. The joys, the sorrows. Right.

The doubts, the fears. The longings for redemption and restoration. Right.

And through it all. Yeah. We hear the voice of God offering comfort and guidance.

Yeah. And ultimately hope. To our listener.

I hope this deep dive has opened your eyes. Yeah.

To the hidden depths of the Psalms. Yeah. Maybe you've always loved them.

Mm-hmm. Oh. Or maybe you felt a little intimidated by them in the past.

Sure. Either way, I hope you'll go back. Yeah.

And read them with fresh eyes. Yeah. With an awareness of the editorial process.

Mm-hmm. The historical context. Yeah.

The royal focus. And the ultimate hope.

Right. They point towards. Yes.

Because the Psalms are more than just ancient words on a page. They are. They're a living testament.

To the human experience of faith. Yes.

A source of comfort and guidance. Yes. For all who seek to know God more deeply.

So dive in, explore. Let the Psalms speak to your heart.

Yeah. Mind and soul. You might be surprised by what you discover.

You might be.