

Psalms: Introduction and Survey of Approaches

Author: Dr. Bruce Waltke | Session 1

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Abstract

In this introductory lecture on the book of Psalms, Dr. Bruce Waltke outlines his personal background in psalm studies and explains the critical distinction between exegesis and exposition. He examines the unique popularity, emotional breadth, and structural complexity of the Psalter across its millennium-long composition. Furthermore, Dr. Waltke introduces key hermeneutical methods—including rhetorical, historical, form-critical, liturgical, messianic, and redactional approaches—that equip students to understand how the Psalms communicate divine truth. Ultimately, he emphasizes the necessity of approaching Scripture with a pure heart and spiritual dependence rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Outline

I. Introduction and Opening Prayer

- A. Approaching Scripture as Holy Ground
- B. Necessity of Divine Revelation and Illumination by the Holy Spirit
- C. Universal Relevance and Varied Impact of God's Word Across Different Listeners

II. Personal Background and Encounter with the Psalms

- A. 1958 at Dallas Theological Seminary: Teaching Exegesis
 - 1. Definition of exegesis (ex out of ago, to lead out of the text)
 - 2. Principle of holistic reading: understanding the whole to interpret the parts
 - 3. Suitability of Psalms for exegesis due to concise unit length (~10 verses average)
- B. 1968 at Dallas Theological Seminary: Exposition of the Psalms
 - 1. Definition of exposition (setting forth truth; transforming wheat into palatable bread)
 - 2. Discovery of diverse scholarly approaches to interpreting the Psalter
- C. Translational Work on the New International Version (NIV)
- D. Collaboration with Professor James Houston (Oxford University)
 - 1. Synthesizing the voice of church history with the voice of the psalmist
 - 2. Published volumes: *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, *The Psalms as Christian Lament*, and *The Psalms as Christian Wisdom and Praise*

III. Popularity and Character of the Psalms

- A. Unmatched Popularity in the Christian Community

1. Frequent joint publishing alongside the New Testament
2. Full expression of human emotion: anguish, divine absence, protest, and exuberant joy
3. Most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament (~250 citations)

B. Historical Practice of Memorizing the Psalms

1. Apostolic and early Christian immersion without formal rabbinic education
2. Monastic requirement of memorization and recitation during daily tasks
3. Early church requirement for bishops to memorize the entire Psalter
4. First book printed on the Gutenberg press and foundational spiritual food for 2,000 years

IV. Complexity and Difficulties of the Psalms

A. Historical Span of Composition

1. Covers nearly 1,000 years from Moses (Psalm 90, ~1300 BC) to Post-Exilic/Qumran era

B. Theological and Ethical Challenges

1. Imprecatory elements (e.g., bashing Babylonian babies in Psalm 137)
2. Raw expressions of feeling abandoned by God (e.g., Psalm 22:1)

C. Academic vs. Devotional Setting

1. Addressing critical scholarship questions (e.g., Davidic authorship)
2. Navigating skeptical secular and academic environments

D. The Dilemma of Talking About God vs. Praying to God

1. Third-person academic distancing vs. second-person personal address (Augustine's Confessions model)

E. Hermeneutics of Sympathy vs. Hermeneutics of Suspicion

1. Dangers of questioning David's motives (Paul Ricoeur's suspicion model)

V. Objectives of the Course

A. Scriptural Purpose (2 Timothy 3:16)

1. Profitable for doctrine, rebuke, correction, and instruction in righteousness
2. Fostering double knowledge: knowing God and knowing oneself in dependent meekness

B. Methodology as the Primary Objective

1. Providing interpretive 'lenses' rather than a complete systematic theology
2. Core principle (Adele Berlin): 'You don't know what a text means until you know how it means'

VI. Survey of Hermeneutical and Methodological Approaches

A. Rhetorical Approach (Poetics)

1. Understanding non-linear ancient poetic structures
2. Alternating Parallelism (A B C D / A' B' C' D') — Example: Elijah at Horeb (1 Kings 19)

3. Chiastic Parallelism (A B C D X D' C' B' A') — Example: Biography of Solomon (1 Kings 1–11)

4. Concentric Parallelism (A B C C' B' A')

B. Historical Approach

1. Investigating authorial context and the preposition LeDavid ('of', 'belonging to', or 'by' David)

C. Form-Critical Approach (Hermann Gunkel)

1. Categorization into major genres: Hymns (Praise) and Petitions (Laments)
2. Doxological nature: all true petitions are grounded in praise (Psalm 88 exception)
3. Ethical distinction between Church (cross/humility) and State (sword)

D. Liturgical Approach

1. Understanding Temple rituals, pageantry, and liturgical processions

E. Eschatological and Messianic Approach

1. Interpreting Psalms as pointing directly to Jesus Christ

F. Redaction Criticism (Canonical Structure)

1. Analyzing the intentional compilation into five books and overall arrangement

VII. Course Calendar and Conclusion

A. Structure of Subsequent Lectures

1. Lecture 2 on Hermeneutics, followed by Historical Approach and Psalm 1
2. Interspersing theoretical approaches with detailed study of individual Psalms

B. Prerequisite of a Pure Heart in Hermeneutics

1. Evaluating presuppositions in modern scholarship (Gunkel, Brueggemann)