

V. Content and Theology of the Psalms

The Psalms, of course, are not systematic theological treatises; rather, they are the response to God as Creator and Redeemer by “sufferers, supplicants, worshipers, and wise men, over a period of many centuries.”

Psalm 1 is deliberately chosen to introduce the two ways of life: Blessedness in the Torah vs. destruction for cynical rebels

A. Praise תְּהִלָּה

Unlike false religions, the religion of Israel was no mere shell of external rites and ceremonies. The Psalms of Israel “...are the manifold expression of the intense devotion of pious souls to God, of the feelings of trust and hope and love which reach a climax in such Psalms as 23,42,43,84” (Kirkpatrick, *The Psalms*, p. lxxxv).

“Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community; indeed, of all creation. Yes, all of life is aimed toward God and finally exists for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to yield, submit, and abandon ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are. Praise is not only a human requirement and a human need, it is also a human delight. We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy. That is what it means to ‘glorify God and enjoy God forever.’

“As praise is appropriate to human community, so praise is appropriate to the character of God, for our praise is a response to God’s power and mercy. Nothing more can be said to God. Nothing more can be added to God. Nonetheless God must be addressed. It is appropriate to address God in need, by way of petition and intercession. But address in need occurs in a context of lyrical submission in which God is addressed not because we have need, but simply because God is God and we are summoned to turn our lives in answer to God.” Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise*, p. 1.

Brueggemann goes on to say that the Psalms are not only a form of **responsive praise** to the “reality, power, and activity of God,” but are also what he calls **constitutive praise** in the sense that the poetic praise of the OT constructs “the theological world in which we shall interact with God” (p. 4). This deliberate construct, which we would recognize as being enlightened by the Torah, requires that man be “critical, knowing, and intentional” about his entering into the praise of the Almighty.

In other words, praise is more than mere feeling, with the putting of the mind in neutral. Praise must focus on an object, so that there generally will be a deliberate, rational aspect to praise besides the emotive aspect. There will be a balance between the groanings of Rom.8:26,27 and the mind/heart of I Cor. 14:15.

Van Gemeren (*EBC* 5:7) also develops the idea of praise being a bridge between man and God, and between our understanding of the past and the future:

“Praise is man’s longing for God and for others to be moved with the same desire for God. The acts of God in the past filled his children with longing for a renewal of his acts, thus intertwining history and eschatology. Israel praised God’s acts in the past: Creation, Exodus, Conquest, life of David victories, and restoration from the Exile. Israel [did] praise the perfections of the Lord, his kingship, his revelation, and his covenant. But they longed for the fullness of redemption, especially when distressed. Any *token* of God’s goodness in fulfilling his promise occasioned a greater hope of eschatological fulfillment. Hence praise bridged the two horizons of the past and the future.”

(Also see Westermann cited by McCann in *Interpretation*, April 1992, p. 124)

Hymns of praise, תְּהִלִּים *tehilim*, typically begin with an appeal to praise Yaweh (33:1-3), move to the body of the praise (the basis of the appeal), and may conclude with a reiteration of the appeal (103). See especially the closing Psalms of the Psalter.

B. God

1. More is said about God the **Creator** in Psalms than any other OT book, except perhaps Isaiah. “Nature’s purpose is to glorify God (148; 104:33) and to point men to Him (19:1; 8:3,4)” —Payne, p. 936.
2. God as **Redeemer** is often seen in the context of the history of the nation, especially in themes from the Exodus (esp. see 78, 81, 105 begins with the history of Abraham, 106). Under this rubric may be placed the 20 **national** Psalms that seem to deal exclusively with Israel in its relation to the God of the covenant (e.g., 44).

In the Psalms God is called most often by his covenant name, (Yaweh 700-, Yah=43X).

3. Several Psalms are called the “**existence of God**” Psalms —10, 14, 53. They actually deal more directly with the practical atheist, who lives as if there is no God, than with the theoretical atheist (14:2,4; 10:4). Like in the rest of the OT revelation, God’s existence is basically presumed in the Psalms.
4. **Monotheism** is assumed and often contrasted with the polytheism of the surrounding nations (e.g., 115 where idols made in the image of man with eyes, ears, etc.).
5. Key attributes of God stressed in the Psalms (per Payne)
 - a. Infinity/eternality (90:2; 139)
 - b. Righteousness, depicted by His truth (“firmness”) and rightness (רָצוֹן *tsedeq*), 5:4,8
 - c. Goodness (100:5; 103); mercy (17:7; 86:15), fatherhood (27:10; 89:26), and especially His gracious faithfulness, רַחֲמֵי *chesed*, (“mercy” in KJV) depict His goodness
 - d. Holiness, His separateness and purity (99:5,9)

C. Man

1. Image of God (Ps. 8:5ff. as His viceroy/steward; as His worshipper, 95:6; 150)
2. While the Psalms are very personal and communicate a personal ethic (honesty, friendship, integrity, righteousness, etc.), man is also viewed in his corporate/political capacity, perhaps because of the royal authorship and the Messianic bearing of many of the Psalms (justice, compassion, peace, etc.).
3. Sin
 - a. **Depravity** is assumed (130:3; 14:2,3; 51:5). Psalm 51 best clarifies the theocentric nature of sin. Sin is not defined as a mistake or an evolutionary imperfection; rather all the terms in this Psalm reveal sin as a violation of the will of God: transgression (v. 1) = rebellion, iniquity (v. 2) = twistedness, sin (v. 2) = missing the mark, and evil (v. 4) = eruption or violent disturbance.
 - b. **Sacrifice** “is referred to as the sanction of the covenant between God and His people” (Kirkpatrick, p. lxxxvi). Sacrifice
 - 1) is required to approach God in His holiness (96:8,9), and 2) is an expression of gratitude (66:13-16). Still, it is recognized here as in the prophets that sacrifice was not efficacious in itself (40:6ff.; 51:17; 69:30,31).
 - c. **Salvation** involves actual, as well as judicial cleansing (32:1,2; 51:2,7).
As might be expected, the two key elements of salvation are repentance (e.g., 32:5) and faith (e.g., 130). Cf. Acts 20:21
 - d. Seven **Penitential Psalms** = self-indictment (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143)
Generally, these Psalms take the form of the **lament**.
 - e. **Imprecations** in the Psalms = indictment of the wicked
Not a question of judging others (=faulty theology); not a question of severe penalty, for the doctrine of hell is nothing less; rather, our surprise is expressed by the question, “where is the mercy that the Psalm writer himself has experienced from God? Righteous indignation has its place, but God’s justice generally is tempered with mercy (Ps 85:10).
See below for further treatment of imprecations as holy writ.

D. Eschatology

1. Intermediate state

Apart from illuminating NT interpretation of the Psalms (Acts 2:31 re: Ps. 16; Acts 13:32-37 re: Pss. 2, 16:10), there is little clear reference in the Psalms to the bodily resurrection (ctr. Job 19:26).

There is a future hope which finds expression in the doctrine of eternal life (16; 17:15; 23:6; 27:4; 49:14,15; 56:13; 73:23,24) and reception into the immediate presence of God (49:15; 71:20 73:24).

Although the above passages imply the resurrection, Kirkpatrick has a humanistic analysis of why the Psalmists do not fully develop the idea of the resurrection and future recompense like the prophets do:

“This world was regarded as the scene of recompense and retribution. If reward and punishment did not come to the individual, they might be expected to come to his posterity. For the man lived on in his children: this was his real continuance in life, not the shadowy existence of Sheol: hence the bitterness of childlessness.” —p. xciv

2. Messianic kingdom — See relevant Messianic Psalms (2, 8, 45, 72, 89, 110, 132)

a. **Universal rule** by God

There is a general sense in which God the Creator rules as King of all creation (e.g., 145; 93; 95; 99).

b. **Mediate rule** of God through anointed representatives from the Dynasty of David (II Sam. 7). This mediate rule is not in contrast to God’s universal rule, but serves to apply and extend God’s direct rule in the affairs of mankind. “The king of Israel makes the domain of Yahweh visible on earth” (Zimmerli as cited in *EBC* on Psalms, p. 586).

God is especially viewed as the Warrior-King among His people to guide and protect them. God’s Viceroy fulfills the same role.

“However, since the days of David, Yahweh has revealed the fact that trust in him is concomitant with trust in his appointed *vassal*, the Davidic king (Pss 2; 72; 89; 132). The Davidic king is his *instrument* of extending his kingdom to all the earth: ‘The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies’ (110:2).” — VanGemeren, p. 17.

The Messianic Psalms cited above (#2) may have an immediate reference to God’s anointed (*messiah*) king, like David. However, because they paint an ideal picture of God’s representative king, these Psalms ultimately point to the ideal Anointed One, Jesus the Messiah, of the dynasty of David.

These references should not be considered simply as prophetic predictions of Christ. Rather, these Messianic Psalms should be viewed from within the perspective of God’s redemptive promise. God’s rule upon the earth is pictured as a mediate rule through His anointed vassal king (e.g., David) who subdues God’s enemies.

The promise reaches its climax in the immediate rule of God through the perfect Son of David, Jesus the Messiah (Ps. 110).

- c. There are also allusions of the meek inheriting the land (37:9,11,22; cf. Mt. 5:5) and the nations coming to acknowledge the Lord at His sanctuary (22:26-31; 66:4; 68:29ff.).

VI. Use of the Psalms

A. Theocratic period

The Torah did not actually prescribe the use of music in Yaweh's worship, except for the blowing of the trumpets at the feast of trumpets.

David, "the sweet Psalmist of Israel," must be credited with being a role model in the worship of God, and more than that, in directing the use of song and musical instruments in the tabernacle worship (I Chron. 25:2; II Chron. 29:25-30, which passage also speaks of God's revelation of worship by His prophets and of Hezekiah's involvement in temple renewal).

Liturgical Psalms (see Delitzsch's section VII on "Temple Music and Psalmody")

1. Certain Psalms were used on different days of the week (92 was for the Sabbath). See Delitzsch, p. 32 for a complete list for each day of the week.
2. Certain Psalms were considered appropriate for the time of the morning (3, 5, 93) or evening sacrifices (4, 141)
3. Certain Psalms were used exclusively on particular festivals and occasions
 - a. Perhaps the **Psalms of Ascent** at the Pilgrim Feasts, #120-134; see Excursus, *supra*.

Other explanations for the title, "Psalm of Degrees/Ascent," has to do with 1) the Psalm's form of intensifying climactic parallelism, or 2) the priests' progressively climbing the steps from the court of men to the court of priests while singing these Psalms.

b. The **Hallel**, Psalms 113-150

- (1) Egyptian Hallel (113-118)
- (2) Great Hallel (120-136)
- (3) Climactic Hallel (146-150)

4. Most of the singing/chanting was done by Levitical choirs; the congregation joined in by responding with “Amen” and “Hallelujah” (I Chron. 16:36).
5. Repetitious refrains (136, 146, 148) suggest **ANTIPHONAL responses** by two choirs. Cf. Ezra 3:10ff., Neh. 12:27ff. and two chambers in temple of Ezk. 40:44; also, Miriam and the women’s response to the men’s voices, Ex. 15:21.

B. Synagogue use (see Bullock, p. 143)

Followed temple usage of the Psalms. Each of the five books of the Psalms may have followed lectionary readings of the five books of the Torah.

C. Intertestamental period

Served as pattern for numerous Maccabean period Psalms, especially the later Psalms written in the early Persian period, according to Frank Cross in *The Ancient Library of Qumran*, p. 165f. This helps establish the fact of the final compilation and completion of the Psalms by the days of Ezra.

D. The Church (see Kirkpatrick)

1. Apostolic

Most quoted OT book in the NT. Jesus hints at their theological and prophetic value when He says “...all that is written about Me...in the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Lk. 24:44).

Even Satan quoted a Psalm (91:11) in his temptation of Christ.

Tertullian says that the Psalms in worship were taken over from Synagogue usage (Bullock, 124). There were morning and evening Psalms even as in the Jewish system.

2. Church History

The Psalter lends itself well for use in church services because it carries 1) the language of worship, and 2) is an expression of the common faith of the ages.

See *The Psalms in History and Biography* by John Ker for a discussion of each of the 150 Psalms regarding their use in the early church, and especially in how they were a blessing to the champions of the Reformation. E.g., Psalm 2 was “The earliest song of thanksgiving and prayer in the Christian Church.... It is the beginning of that long history in which David, Christ, and the experience of the Church, are found so often re-appearing in union (Acts

4:24-30). *** Verse 10 was the remonstrance addressed to Henry VIII by John Lambert, who was burned at Smithfield in 1538: ‘Now ye kings, understand, and ye which judge the earth be wise and learned. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice in him with trembling’“ (pp. 19,20).

VII. Excursus on Imprecations in the Psalms

It is better to speak of “imprecations” in the Psalms than to speak of imprecatory Psalms. There are some 50 imprecations in 18 Psalms that catch our attention. An **imprecation** is a curse or invoking of harsh judgment upon enemies. These are Israelite execration texts.

See especially Psalms 35:5,6,8; 59:13; 109:8-16; 137.

The problem arises, are these imprecations in keeping with 1) the teachings of Jesus? and 2) with the praise and worship of the Psalms?

For one of the best treatments of the subject, see Chalmers Martin, “Imprecations in the Psalms,” reprinted in *Classical Evangelical Essays*, W. Kaiser, ed.

Kirkpatrick has a helpful discussion, but can be misleading in his introductory thoughts:

“In what light then are these utterances to be regarded? They must be viewed as belonging to the dispensation of the OT; they must be estimated from the standpoint of the Law, which was based upon the rule of retaliation, and not on the Gospel, which is animated by the principle of love; they belong to the spirit of Elijah, not of Christ; they use the language of the age which was taught to love its neighbour and hate its enemy (Matt. 5:43)” —p. lxxxix.

Kirkpatrick raises the legitimate question about the seeming contradiction between the spirit of these cursings and the NT ethic taught in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

Princeton scholar, Wm. B. Greene, has a helpful summary for the Western observer (“Ethics and OT Theology” in *Classical Evangelical Essays*, pp. 213ff.):

A. **Hyperbole.** The Eastern poet uses inflated language to express the same thing that the Western logician uses deliberate (often philosophical) language for.

“The Hebrew poet sings ‘The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.’ Yet these glowing words would not mean more than the precise terms that we would employ, such as, ‘Good men will rejoice when they see virtue triumphant, even if its prosperity be attended with the just and needed sufferings of the vicious.’“ (58:10)

In fact, some of prayers of imprecation parallel other [simple] indicative assertions in other Psalms of God’s dealings with the wicked:

Imprecation	Statement of Fact
35.5	1.4
35.8	9.15

35.26 6.10
58.6 3.7

- B. The Psalmists identify their enemies with **God's enemies**, 139:21-23. As God's representatives, their cause is God's cause, so that personal vindictiveness may be divorced from the imprecation (Dt. 32:35).

Bear in mind that the Sermon on the Mount addresses the Christian's personal ethics, not the standards of civil justice for the state. As Martin also points out, the OT did teach the ethic of loving personal enemies (Lev. 19:18; Ex. 23:4,5; Prov. 24:29; 25:21-22).

The imprecations are a plea for swift and fair justice in keeping with the sense of God's justice. Virulent, anti-christian crimes may easily provoke a sense of **righteous indignation** (58:11). As C.S. Lewis suggests in Bullock (p. 141), the absence of any indignation in our lives should alarm us.

- C. Imprecations in the light of the above are not out of keeping with **God's nature**. "Divine grace...is supported by divine justice, and divine justice prepares for divine grace."

Isaiah 11:4 (cf. Rev. 19) promises that Messiah will slay the wicked with the 'rod of His mouth and... with the breath of His lips...', a case of metaphorical language.

The NT has its threats and imprecations, too, and though not as numerous, may be just as fearful:

Matt. 11:21-24 (Chorazin & Bethsaida); 25:41; I Cor 16:22; Gal. 1:8,9; 5:12; II Tim. 4:14 ctr. 4:16; Heb. 10:28,29; Rev. 6:10

Interestingly, apart from Psalms 2, 22, 110, 118, the imprecatory Psalms are quoted most often by the Lord and the apostles, one of the harshest, Psalm 69, being cited five times. Martin ("Imprecations in the Psalms" reprinted in *Classical Evangelical Essays*) quotes a Dr. Binnie: "It would seem that our Lord appropriated this (69th) psalm to Himself, and that we are to take it as a disclosure of thought and feelings which found a place in his Heart during His ministry on earth" (pp. 130f.). In the guest chamber (Jn. 15:25), He quotes v. 4, "they hated me without cause;" other refs.: Jn. 2:17 cf. 69:9; Acts 1:20; Rom. 15:3 cf. 69:9; Rom.2:9,10 cf. 69:22,23.

Martin concludes:

"I do not say that the fact that these psalms are so unequivocally endorsed and appropriated by our blessed Lord explains the difficulty they involve. But I am sure that the simple statement of it will constrain the

disciples of Christ to touch them with a reverent hand, and rather to distrust their own judgment concerning them than to brand such Scriptures as the products of an unsanctified and unchristian temper” (p. 132).

VIII. Messianic Psalms

A. Defined

1. Basically, Psalms whose interpretations may devolve upon Jesus Christ are considered Messianic. His attributes or work may be in view, especially His office as King. Yet He is Messiah (“anointed one”) in the fullest sense in that He was anointed also as a Priest and a Prophet. Jesus Himself claimed that the Psalms spoke of Him (Lk. 24:44).

Bear in mind that the king of Israel (e.g., David, Hezekiah) as God’s vassal and representative is called God’s “anointed.” In interpretation of the Messianic Psalms, therefore, there will be historical reference to the contemporary king:

“The Davidic king ‘administers’ the kingdom of God as a vassal. He rules ‘in the name’ of Yaweh. The royal administration of the Davidic king is representative of God’s kingdom to the extent that the king brings in the kingdom in glory and power in accordance with the divine grant. Yahweh has revealed his name to his people, but in a more distinctive way to his king. All that the name signifies (the perfections, presence, blessings, and victorious deliverance) are given to the king by divine grant (72:18-19; cf. 54; 89:24; 91:14-15; 118:10-12). The Lord has endowed his messianic King with all that he needs to rule as his vassal.” —Van Gemeren in *EBC*, p 587

Van Gemeren also holds that all of God’s people should find personal comfort in the Messianic Psalms. These Psalms may point primarily to Christ; they may have an historical reference to the historical anointed king; yet because of our corporate identity with God’s Messiah, “we can turn to the language of the Psalms in our prayers, reflecting on our Lord’s suffering in his intercessory prayers for us (Heb. 2:6; 10:5-18). These psalms should not be restricted to being a mere prediction of the Messiah’s suffering, because these words are also given for our encouragement.” Van Gemeren, p. 588.

B. Messianic Psalms Delimited

1. Many Bible students (Payne) recognize at least 13 Psalms as being explicitly Messianic, those which are clearly quoted or alluded to in the NT. (See supplement for which Psalms have the corresponding NT reference.)
2. Bullock offers the following criteria for his 21 Messianic Psalms:
 - a. The language outruns the abilities of the human subject, e.g., the prayer for the king in Ps. 72.

- b. Messianic terms, like “anointed,” “son of man,” e.g., Ps. 144:3
 - c. When NT circumstance fits the language of the Psalm, e.g., Ps. 55:12,13,20 and the betrayal of Jesus.
3. In an essay on “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” (*Tradition and Testament*, Feinberg, eds.), Bruce Waltke maintains boldly that “... the Psalms are ultimately the prayers of Jesus Christ, Son of God” (p. 16). From his perspective of canon criticism, he finds a Christological interpretation for most every Psalm: “...the human subject of the psalms—whether it be the blessed man of Psalm 1, the one proclaiming himself the son of God in Psalm 2, the suffering petitioner in Psalms 3-7, the son of man in Psalm 8—is Jesus Christ” (p. 7).

Growing out of form criticism and canon criticism, the rationale for this understanding stems from the recognition that more of the Psalms than realized were composed by and **about the king** (pp.12,13).

- a. The Davidic Covenant conditions the message of many Psalms (cf. 89), especially the Royal Psalms. The **king represented the rule of God**. “Each king became the son of God through his anointing [II Sam. 23:1,2] with Yahweh’s Spirit” (p. 14; cf. I Chron. 29:22,23). Though the sons of David proved to be less than Messianic, the Davidic kings pointed to the day when the perfect Son of David would reign as the perfect Messianic King.
- b. The **king represented the people**, making their cause his cause so that nothing he did was of a private nature. What they felt, he felt. Hence, matters that seem to be personal are actually being viewed through the lens of the king’s life to represent everyman. This makes it unnecessary to democratize the Psalms.
- c. The **king was the embodiment of the nation** in its political capacity. National Psalms which speak of the nation’s enemies or are cast in the form of a lament make the king the point of reference. Note Psalm 44 by the sons of Korah where the subject alternates between “we” and “I.”
- d. The living king was the subject of most of the Psalms from the standpoint that **the king played a central role in the religions** of the Ancient Near East; there are numerous hymns and laments from the pens of Mesopotamian kings.

Waltke argues that the advantage of this Christological (Messianic) hermeneutical approach is that it helps us understand the NT treatment of the Psalms.

Some Psalms (e.g., 16, 40) which appear to speak of the man David are applied to his Son Jesus in the NT. What may seem to be a novel NT hermeneutic may be the originally intended use of the Psalm. Through the centuries, the synagogues had changed the point of reference from Yaweh’s king (the office, not the historic individual) to a more

democratic Everyman. Jesus and the apostles actually bring us back to the true focus: the ideal, Messianic King.

Advantage: we don't have to assume that the NT writers invented some "mystical/spiritual" method of interpretation in handling what to us are obscure Messianic references in the Psalms.

This canonical (big picture) approach, which takes into account the Psalm's historical meaning in regard to the author, to temple usage, to the rest of the OT, and to the rest of the canon, avoids the unlimited number of meanings of the allegorical approach, as well as the narrow, one-meaning historical-only approach of the Antiochian school.

C. Messianic Psalms Described

1. Messianic references view Jesus Christ in His tri-fold role of Prophet, Priest, and King. Entry into each office historically was by anointing for consecration.

Prophets — Ps. 105:15 cf. I Kgs. 19:16; note Is. 61:1f.

Priests — Lev. 16:32

Kings — Ps. 89:38,51 cf. I Sam. 10:1

2. Form analysis determines the Messiah's point of reference to the speaker in the Psalm, whether first, second, or third person. (See the supplemental chart by Payne.)

3. Content analysis categorizes the Messianic Psalms by subject matter.

- a. Payne easily subdivides the Psalms by Christ's three offices. The content views Messiah as King (seven Royal Psalms), as Priest (six Passion Psalms), or as Prophet (latter half of Ps.22).

—Royal Psalms: 2, 8, 45, 72, 89, 110, 132

—Passion Psalms: 16, 22, 40, 69, 102, 109

—Prophetic Psalm: 22

- b. Bullock divides his collection of Psalms between Messiah as the ideal King and the ideal Man (royal Person and Commoner):

(Exaltation) —Royal Psalms: 2, 18, 29, 21, 45, 61, 72, 89, 110, (Second David) 132, 144

(Humiliation) —Second Adam: 8, 16, 22, 35, 40, 41, 55, 69, 102, 109