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Observations, Types & Purposes

Things to be aware of when reading the Psalms

General Observations

- ➔ The composition of the individual psalms covers a period of more than 800 years.
- ➔ The compilation of the Psalter spans close to 1,000 years.
- ➔ The Psalter is a collection of many different psalms written by many different writers.
- ➔ The completion of the collection is around 2nd century BC
- ➔ The title of the book has varied. 1) Greek O.T. – Psalmos meaning a song sung to the accompaniment of the harp. 2) Hebrew O.T. – Tehillim – meaning “praises”
- ➔ The audience addressed initially by the completed Psalter is those living in the aftermath of the historical fall of Israel/Judah
- ➔ The book is subdivided into five smaller books

Types

- ➔ Lament Psalms – Ps. 3-17,44, 51
- ➔ Thanksgiving Psalms – Ps. 30,32,121
- ➔ Praise Psalms – Ps. 8,33,65,100,145-150
- ➔ Wisdom Psalms – Ps. 1,37,49,112,119
- ➔ Pilgrim Psalms – Ps. 120-134
- ➔ Royal Psalms – Ps. 2,18,21,45,72,89,101,110,132,144
- ➔ Imprecatory Psalms – Ps. 7,35,40,55,58,109,139
- ➔ Enthronement Psalms – Ps. 93,96-99

Purpose(s)

The Psalter's Question:

How can a people continue to live joyfully and rightly when the former hopes are gone?

The Psalter's Answer:

Yahweh is worthy of praise even in the aftermath of exile!

The Psalter's Application:

Therefore, transfer your desire and delight from earthly hope and pin it upon heavenly hope; from earthly Davidic kings to Yahweh [Jesus Christ]; for He reigns forever.

How to read the Psalter

The book of Psalms offers hope to post-exilic communities in several ways¹.

1. At the times when earthly kings appear to be gaining the upper hand over Israel's God (Yahweh) and his people, the people can nevertheless put their trust in the LORD to deliver them. These communities could easily relate to **Psalms of lament**. They would need to realize that their only recourse was to "put your hope in God" (ps.42:5,11; 43:11)
2. God's past saving activity also provided a basis for hope in his continued faithfulness regardless of the unpromising circumstances. These communities could easily relate to the **Psalms of thanksgiving**. They would begin to realize in the psalms of thanksgiving that God's goodness to past generations are actually a pattern for faithfulness (hesed) which "endures forever" (cf. Ps.136 especially how it precedes 137 and 105-106 and in particular 106:47 – Save us, O LORD our God and gather us from the nations)

¹ This insight was taken by permission from a paper by my former Bible teacher Ray Lubek. He presented his paper at the Evangelical Theological Society national meetings in Kansas City, November 23, 1991.

3. Yahweh's sovereignty over all the earth and every king who went up against him was a reminder of on whom God's people were to pin their hope. The **royal Psalms** lay bare this truth noticeably (e.g. Ps.2; 93-99)
4. Another basis of hope for a troubled and tattered group (i.e. post-exilic people) was to be found in an ironic way. The communities who came out of captivity could not initiate their own salvation. Their temple was in ruins (or rebuilt in an inferior way), their future was unpromising and their king was yet to be found (see Jer.22:24-30 and the curse of Coniah). The **imprecatory Psalms** demonstrate hope in that all this community could do was "wait" on Yahweh to even the score with his people and to vindicate his name against the wicked. The "bloodthirstiness" found in these types of prayers show the psalmist not personally executing justice but waiting upon the LORD to act in vindication (e.g. Ps. 7; 55; 58-59; 69; 83; 109; 137; 140-141)
5. Hope was introduced and strengthened also through the **enthronement Psalms**. Reestablishing Yahweh's reign in Zion remains a future hope that follows their return (In this connection, we prefer to understand the phrase "A song of ascents" found in Ps. 120-134 as a reference to the return of the people from captivity to the city of God's kingdom; Zion itself). These psalms are to be seen eschatologically as pointing to the Messiah.

The net result from viewing the various types of Psalms is that the problem of evil, far from extinguishing faith in the LORD, redirects faith in the direction of a future vindication. Viewing Scripture from this side of the Cross, we can see the future present. The "future" temple, priests, atonement, king is located only in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how we are to read the Psalter.

