

*Teaching from*  
*The Psalms*

Extra Notes for Cyprus Training Session

June 2018

# Psalms – Bible Teachers’ Workshop

Psalms are Scripture & share its general characteristics – God’s Word (2Tim.3v15ff): Authoritative (& Inerrant), Clear, Necessary, Sufficient. Point to Christ (John 5v39), in particular give wisdom for salvation through faith in Jesus; Useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, training... thorough equipping. Approach with prayer, trembling & expectancy...

But **what is distinctive about the Psalms**; what are their particular characteristics?

- **poetry** (also true of Prophets, Job, Songs) – emotionally engaging;
- **addressed to God**, in large measure – this raises a KEY INTERPRETATIVE QUESTION: “How do words addressed to God function as God’s authoritative word to us? Should we automatically identify with the Psalmist? To what extent and on what grounds”
- ‘general’ & ‘occasional’ (e.g. coronation, royal wedding), individual (lots of experiences: intimate, personal, interesting!) & corporate (Israel’s ‘hymn-book’ in temple worship)
- A growing book (unlike other Scriptures) – multiple authors over 1000 year time span – from exodus (Ps.90) through monarchy (Ps.23) to exile (Ps.137) & beyond (Ps.126)...

## FORM: The Psalms are Poems

Poetry is different from prose (Poetry = laid out differently; uses repetition, metaphor...) E.g.:

<p><b>Exodus 14v21-23, 26-28</b></p> <p>Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, <sup>22</sup> and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. <sup>23</sup> The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen.” <sup>27</sup> Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing towards it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. <sup>28</sup> The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen – the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.</p>	<p><b>Exodus 15v8-12</b></p> <p>By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up.  The surging waters stood firm like a wall;  the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.</p> <p><sup>9</sup> “The enemy boasted, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake them.  I will divide the spoils; I will gorge myself on them.  I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy them.’</p> <p><sup>10</sup> But you blew with your breath, and the sea covered them.  They sank like lead in the mighty waters.  “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?  Who is like you – majestic in holiness,  awesome in glory, working wonders?</p> <p><sup>12</sup> You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them.</p>
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Furthermore, Hebrew poetry is different from the poetry we are generally familiar with:

<p><b>Familiar Poetry</b> (Greek/Latin→English)</p> <p>God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm.</p> <p>His <u>purposes</u> will <u>ripen</u> <b>fast</b>, Unfolding <u>every</u> <b>hour</b>; The <u>bud</u> may <u>have</u> a <b>bitter taste</b>, But <u>sweet</u> will <u>be</u> the <b>flower</b>.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>William Cowper</i></p>	<p><b>Hebrew Poetry</b> (Psalm 6v1-5)</p> <p>O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, <i>nor discipline me in your wrath.</i></p> <p><sup>2</sup> Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; <i>heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.</i></p> <p><sup>3</sup> My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD – how long?</p> <p><sup>4</sup> Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; <i>save me for the sake of your steadfast love.</i></p> <p><sup>5</sup> For in death there is no remembrance of you; <i>in Sheol who will give you praise? ...</i></p>
<p>regular meter (i.e. same number of syllables per line); regular pattern of <u>stressed/unstressed</u> syllables; <b>rhyme</b>, equal length 'stanzas' (poetic verses) etc.</p>	<p>No rigid meter / syllable-stress / stanzas; Short, roughly equal-length phrases, often grouped in pairs (or threes), with the <i>second phrase</i> 'answering' the first.</p>

Poetry is somewhat foreign to many of us (NB: in this respect, our culture is the exception); rightly handling poetry is part science, part art. You can learn the basics, but there is also an element of 'having a feel for it' which differs between people. Since it is *Scriptural* poetry, there is also an explicitly *spiritual* element (1Cor.2v14), hence the need to study *and pray*...

### Parallelism ("Thought Rhymes")

Terminology (varies between commentators): Individual **phrases** (e.g. "O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger") are grouped together in **poetic lines** (e.g. "O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger / nor discipline me in your wrath"). The individual phrase may also be referred to as a **colon** (plural = 'cola') or **stich**. A poetic line with two phrases is called a **bicolon**; with three phrases = tricolon (e.g. Ps.92v9), standalone phrases = monocola.

How should we understand these parallel phrases? There have been 3 approaches

- **A≠B**, ('early'): emphasise *difference* (God doesn't waste words); two separate points. E.g. Ps.8v4, would try to make a distinction between "man" & "son of man" etc.
- **A=B** ('traditional', Robert Lowth, 1750ff) = "saying same thing twice, in different words"
- **A what's more B** ('correct' :- ) = second phrase tends to 'carry forward' the thought of the first, often by adding precision/nuance. The two phrases are mutually interpreting.

So In Ps.6v1: wrath & anger are synonymous [contra **A≠B**], but rebuke & discipline carry separate nuances [contra **A=B**]; perhaps "rebuke" shows the *nature* of God's discipline (the Psalmist has sinned), whereas "discipline" shows the *framework* of God's rebuke (he is not a wicked man being condemned, but a believer being dealt with by his covenant God).

There are various types of parallelism (describing the precise relationship between phrases), most commonly *synonymous* (either straight repetition, or 'development' as above) and *antithetic* ('two sides of the coin', Prov.10v1).

[Lowth also had *synthetic* parallelism (everything else) but this is too general to be useful]. Other types are sometimes classified, e.g. *analogy* (Ps.42v1); *climactic* (Ps.29v1); etc. Sometimes the parallel involves ellipsis (missing out an element, usually the verb: Ps.88v6)

In addition to parallelism, several other poetic features occur in the psalms:

- ***chiasm*** – ABBA pattern, Ps.1v6. "the way of the righteous" echoes "the way of the wicked", and "watches over" is parallel to "will perish" [both verbs, referring to the ways]. on a larger scale see Ps.2 where the four stanzas follow the ABBA pattern, i.e. v1-3 / v10-12 = kings of the earth, v4-6 / v7-9 = heavenly proclamations
- ***Inclusio*** = having a repeated phrase or idea at the beginning and end of a section, thus binding a section together; Ps.8v1&9;
- ***Acrostic*** = the lines/phrases/stanzas begin with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet; Ps.25, 119;

### Imagery ("Thought Pictures")

Rich & profound (God as shield, fortress, rock, storm cloud, shepherd, warrior, archer...)

Evokes pictures in our minds (Ps.113: God enthroned, God helping the poor; see Ps.114!)

Types: *simile*: "like/as" (Pss.42v1, 103v13, 141v2); *metaphor*: "is" (Pss.23v1, 61v3, 22v12)

Imagery always prompts us to ask "similar in what way(s)?" (e.g. Ps.1: How is the righteous man like a tree?) The rest of the Psalm often provides the answer. Sometimes the initial dissimilarity of things being compared may jolt us (cf. Pss.78v65f, 127v4, 114v4, 59v7).

WARNING: Poetic language must be treated as such – Ex.15v8&9: nostrils? actually said?

### Ambiguity ("This or That or Both")

Reading other portions of Scripture we ask, does this passage mean *this* or *that*? Our goal is *precision*; ambiguity is something to be 'cleared up'. However, in poetry (and occasionally elsewhere) ambiguity may be intentional and productive. E.g. Ps.133v3: where is "there"? Mount Zion? Where Aaron (the priesthood) is? or where there is Unity? We are forced to think & compare again; we see how the different possibilities are in fact related. However...

WARNING: don't overuse: Much ambiguity calls for careful study yielding detailed precision!

### **Why use poetry rather than prose?**

After all: Poetry (and particularly imagery) is *less precise* (it does not easily reduce to 'statements of fact'), *less economic* (e.g. repetition), and *more effort to interpret*. Isn't prose a better vehicle for truth (like a Science textbook)?

- "whatever is lost in precision is gained in vividness of expression" (beautiful, memorable) It would be a travesty to replace Ps.19v1-6 with the prose equivalent: "God is revealed in his creation, especially in the heavenly bodies"!

- The goal is not merely to *inform*, but rather to *impact, involve, engage*. Poetry appeals to, and involves, the *whole person* not just the mind: it stirs up emotions, fires the imagination, grips the will – but it also stimulates the mind, forcing us & helping us to think (“*what does this parallel add? what does this image convey? is there intentional ambiguity?*”). Being forced to think is very important in Bible reading!
- Suggests, invokes & evokes a whole sphere of meaning (How long would it take to give a prose description of the implications of Ps.23v1?), thus actually economy of language!
- Intensity of emotion does not preclude carefully crafted form (the most ‘emotional’ book in Scripture, Lamentations, is also the most exquisitely crafted, full of acrostics!)
- Suits the ‘incomprehensible’ God, who cannot be exhaustively described.

Note that the key qualities of Hebrew poetry – parallelism and imagery – are ‘translation-resilient’ (unlike meter, rhythm and rhyme). What a wise & impressively-sovereign God we have! And we need not feel at the mercy of those who know the Hebrew (true of Greek too!)

Nevertheless, cultural and historical distance (2,500-3,500 years!) lessens or distorts the impact (particularly of imagery), so we need help to better empathise with the original hearers, so as to ‘hear what they heard’ (e.g. Ps.120: Meshech, Kedar, broom tree...). Here commentaries / study Bibles can give help, though in the case of Meshech and Kedar a concordance alone might give you enough clue...

A final warning regarding poetry; sometimes poetic form affects meaning (see above on Ps.6v1); at other times it just ‘adorns’ (a testimony to the psalmist’s loving, careful composition and, originally, an aid to memory). In either case, we should not over-emphasise the *form* at the expense of the *content* – the poetry is the servant of the meaning; beauty adorns truth and should not be allowed to distract from it! (Ezekiel 33v32)...

**FUNCTION (I): The Psalms Teach Truth** – e.g. the INSTRUCTION of Ps.1

## **The Psalms speak to us of God**

*“The God who creates & rules his people, and who speaks to & meets with them, who distinguishes & protects his people, and who judges & blesses them; who refines his people, and who fulfils his purpose for them” (Grogan)*

The Psalms are a rich theological meditation on a broad range of topics: In Pss.120-134 alone – God: Majestic, Creator, Protector ♦ Judgment ♦ Faith & meekness ♦ Mercy & forgiveness, Redemption, Perseverance of the Saints ♦ Home & Family ♦ Covenant & Messiah ♦ Worship ♦ Land & Temple ♦ Human suffering & future hope...

Overarching context = God’s covenant relationship with his people (“Our God”) with its history (Exodus & Davidic dynasty), its benefits (*hesed* – covenant love, Ps.136), and its requirements (Ps.1 – Yahweh’s *Torah*, instruction; with its blessings/curses).

Grogan summarises the message of the book of Psalms:

1. The way of wisdom is godliness
2. This involves delight in, and meditation upon God's word
3. God promises blessing for the righteous and judgment for the wicked
4. God has established a king and pledges to support him
5. God's support for the king does not mean he will be without suffering
6. The blessing and the judgment need to be viewed eschatologically
7. God has established foundations on which his people may rest in times of perplexity
8. True godliness is driven to God, not away from him, by affliction and perplexity
9. Life for the believer should be punctuated by, and will reach its consummation in, praise
10. God's purpose moves forward to its great climax in Christ (see later...)

In the Psalms we learn not only about God & Truth but about ourselves (frightening!)

- either we gain **insight** (and sensitivity!) regarding the struggles of others,
- or we ourselves **identify** with the Psalmist's joy, grief, fear, hope, care, perplexity. Also his reverence, shame, fear, sadness, anger and doubt – even the theology of the Psalms is often not so much to argue/persuade/convince but to confess faith/love...

## FUNCTION (II): The Psalms Express Experience

**The Psalms speak for us to God** – e.g. the PRAISE of Ps.103 (cf. Ps.150)

"No matter how sad or how glad you are, there is a psalm that expresses it" (Longman)

"The Psalms speak to all seasons of our souls" (Calvin)

Authorised expression of our personal experience (with a wise balance of petition & praise)

- Gives us words to say, to express our feelings (joys & struggles, successes & failures, hopes & regrets!); even anger (channelled to & through God, not carried out!)
- In particular, provides us with prayers (Ps.130v1-2) and praises, as an aid for both our individual & our corporate devotions (on mutual worship & encouragement, see Eph.5v18-21, Col.3v16)
- Encourages honest & heartfelt dealings with God (cf. Job); emotion is not bad, but it is to be grounded in covenant faith; we are called to the discipline (but *not* repression) of our emotions.

As with the topics, so a wide range of personal experiences, some familiar, some foreign.

Again, in Pss.120-134 alone – crying & celebrating, tears & laughter, 'sowing with tears' & 'reaping with joy' ♦ remembering God's promises, humbly trusting him, praying to him in distress, praising him for narrow escapes ♦ enduring deceitful & warmongering words, frustration at being taunted & the object of contempt; fierce & wearing persecution ♦ living as pilgrims; Going to church (?) ♦ building & watching, sleepless nights, futile work! Wife, children & grandchildren!...

Great potential: a place of encounter with God - and yet, of encounter in an 'everyday setting' (more accessible to us than the miraculous events of e.g. Exodus / gospels?)  
Conversation between God & his people: direct, intimate, intense & *honest*

Also, lack of specific details in many of the Psalms (contra e.g. Ex.15, Judges 5) encourages wide applicability. Reconstruction of the life-setting ('Sitz im leben') – either the Psalmist's original situation or the 'cultic context' in which the psalm was used – is usually speculative, often unprofitable, and may even be counterproductive, if it tends to limit the application. Note Ps.120 – it fits David's flight from Absalom (exile; scheming Ahithophel & Absalom; warmongering Joab et al.)... but also his fugitive years (cf. Ps.52), and indeed any number of other possibilities (it is not even attributed to David). How widely applicable the following words are! (What was the mire? What caused the tears? Don't know: If the cap fits, wear it!)

"I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry.  
He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;  
he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." (Ps.40v1-2)

"For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling" (Ps.116v8)

Because Psalms often speak so clearly into our experience, we can forget that they are OT Scripture, and must be interpreted with care (as e.g. Leviticus etc.) Undoubtedly Christians share common experiences with OT believers but don't forget that the Psalms are...

Old-Covenant – Need to ask, What needs 'translating' into NT terms?

- Praise to God for his saving acts naturally extends to praise for *the* saving act, the ✠.
- 'OT religion' – Animal sacrifices, temple & priesthood (Ps.133), Pilgrimage to Zion... Jerusalem → Church? Pss.122v6 (regularly 'misapplied!'), 130v8...
- The obedient law-keeper: Ps.1 (doorway to the whole book); law ↔ gospel? (fiddly)
- Material vs. Spiritual blessing, Pss.121v5ff, 127v3ff, 128.  
(there is already a 'tension' within the wisdom literature, cf. Proverbs with Job)
- Imprecations vs. love your enemies? Pss.120v3-4, 129v5ff (see Derek Kidner's intro)

## FUNCTION (III): The Psalms Communicate Christ

In modern Psalm study (and in 'Biblical / Redemptive-Historical Theology' in general) there is often a reaction to past 'assumptions of applicability that never grapple with the OT / NT difference' – basically saying "The Psalmist is separated from us by THE great redemptive event, the cross; thus the Psalms don't apply directly to us, but only to us through/in Christ"

This is a proper corrective to a naïve approach, but it is overstated. The NT does apply Psalms to Christ, but also directly to Christians, e.g. Ps.95 & 118v6 in Hebrews 3-4 & 13v6

(also cf. Paul's allusion to Ps.22v21 in 2Tim 4v17). In general, you need to be aware of the OT/NT hermeneutical issue however 'straightforward' you feel the psalm's application to be... but don't tie yourself in unnecessary knots (common sense!)

So do we immediately identify with the Psalmist, or see the psalm as pointing to Christ? Both approaches may be valid: e.g. the 'righteous sufferer' psalms (that 'uncomfortable' assertion of innocence! We identify more easily with Ps.51 than Ps.18v20-24!)

- specific innocence – unjust persecution suffered by God's people, who cry out to him
- innocence par excellence – Christ (the only one who could proclaim himself faithful in absolute terms)

## How do the Psalms speak of Christ?

The Psalms point to Christ in many different ways (some largely specific to the Psalms)

- The Davidic **King** – a human monarchy that did not infringe upon theocracy, but reflected God's kingship, 2Sam.7 (basic, and introduced almost immediately, Ps.2)
  - the King extravagantly praised, Ps.110, Ps.45v6! **God's Son** (Ps.2 in Acts 13)
  - his promised descendent, Ps.132, & the bounds of his kingdom, Ps.2, Ps.72
- The Righteous **Suffering** Servant, who trusts God and is ultimately vindicated (Isaiah 53), Pss.22&69; Ps.129v3. **Resurrection** (Ps.16 in Acts 2&13)
- The Man *par excellence* (Ps.8v4); the Rejected Stone (Ps.118v22); etc...

Follows Jesus' own lead, Luke 24v44 – Ps.69 in John 2; Ps.41 in John 13; Ps.22 in Matt 27

Is Christ "the singer of the Psalms" in every case (Augustine, cf. Col.3v16, "word of Christ")? Christ the perfect worshipper, the 'sinking sin-bearer', interceding for us (so Luther, who understood Ps.69v2 as "Christ stuck in our mud", v5). In fact, this is too forced, for surely, when the Davidic king is praised, Christ is the object, and not the singer. Nevertheless we are challenged to read Christologically. Indeed, all our reading of Scripture should be conditioned by "Christ and him crucified". But some Psalms point to Christ *implicitly*...

- revealing universal sinfulness (which is dealt with at the cross, see Rom.3v10-18)
- depicting the character & fate of sinners (those outside Christ) and of the righteous (firstly Christ himself, then those in Christ, and living as such);
- highlighting the character of God (which is supremely revealed in Christ), etc.



The Psalms lead us to consider God's character and his ways.

Our faith is strengthened by the testimony & example of other believers (Pss.120v1, 121).

We are also exhorted by *command* (the call to communal, enthusiastic worship etc.) and by *example* (e.g. the Wisdom psalms, "Blessed is he who...");

Our personal resolves should be in line with the "I will..."s of the Psalms (for if they refer firstly to Christ, e.g. Ps.40v8 in Heb 10v9, yet we are to imitate Christ!)

The Psalms point to our Saviour in many ways – in each case we need to identify how.

# Practical Exercise – Psalm 120

POETRY (The following questions may be of general use, whatever psalm is being tackled...)

Divide the unformatted text it into ‘phrases’, ‘poetic lines’ & stanzas.

Is there any parallelism? If so, what sort?

Is there any imagery? How does it ‘work’?

Is there any ambiguity? (bring this out in a BS: “are you sure it means X”?)

Is there a refrain, or repeated language/phrases?

Is there any imagery / language / allusion that I need help with understanding?

In the Psalm, who is speaking & to whom? (Is the psalmist speaking on his own behalf, or Israel’s, Pss.124,126, or God’s, Ps.50? Is he speaking as the Davidic King, Ps.2?)

COMMENTS...

BEFORE	AFTER
<p><b>Psalm 120</b> A SONG OF ASCENTS. <sup>1</sup> In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. <sup>2</sup> Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. <sup>3</sup> What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue? <sup>4</sup> A warrior’s sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree! <sup>5</sup> Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! <sup>6</sup> Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. <sup>7</sup> I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war! (ESV)</p>	<p><b>Psalm 120</b> A SONG OF ASCENTS. [INDIVIDUAL PSALMIST speaking throughout]</p> <p><sup>1</sup>In my distress I called to the LORD, [GENERAL STATEMENT] and he answered me.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> Deliver me, O LORD, [SPEAKING TO GOD] from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. ← <i>synonymous parallel (with prev).</i></p> <p><sup>3</sup> What shall be given to you, [SPEAKING TO A TONGUE?! this is poetry] and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue, ← <i>synon. parallel</i></p> <p><sup>4</sup> A warrior’s sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree! ← <i>additive parallel</i></p> <p><sup>5</sup> Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! [SPEAKING TO HIMSELF, GEN.] ← <i>parallel (imagery)</i></p> <p><sup>6</sup> Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.</p> <p><sup>7</sup> I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war! ← <i>antithetic parallel</i></p>

**Layout:** This division into stanzas is based on changes in who is being addressed.

Note v2 & 3 are laid out slightly differently in the NIV and ESV (not a ‘science’...)

**Parallelism:** Don’t try to differentiate “lips / tongue” (v2), “sojourn / dwell” (v5), but maybe see different aspects of judgement in “sharp arrows / coals” (v4);

**Imagery:** v3: Sharp arrows / long-burning broom-tree charcoal speak of God's judgment  
v5: Not literal (Meshech is remote North, Kedar is south-east) both foreigners, hostile (could guess the latter from v6-7). Probably "so far from home", either literally, or how he feels. Don't over-exegete imagery (particularly personification of God, Ex.15v8 etc).

**Ambiguity?** v2: deliver me... Is he bemoaning his own tongue (Rom.7v24) or of slander against him. Probably the latter, which is more frequent in the psalms.  
v4: is it describing what the tongue is (cf. James 3v6), or what it deserves (v3,7 imply the latter, but the very potential for ambiguity underlines the fittingness of the judgment)

#### THEOLOGY, EXPERIENCE, CHRIST

**Why was it written, what is it about** (a problem faced, a reason for praise, etc.)

**What is the 'mood' of the Psalm?** (basically: praise, lament, or instruction?)

**Are there any OT / NT issues to grapple with?**

**How does it point to Christ?**

**How will I aim to apply this Psalm?** (& what question(s) might bring out this application?)



#### SOME FINAL 'DOS AND DON'TS'

- Treat the psalm as a whole unit (possible for almost all psalms, though maybe not 119!)
- It may be better to try and grasp the overall theme / development / mood / structure of the psalm before (or even instead of!) ploughing into a verse-by-verse approach.
- However, you *will* want to have covered/understood all the verses, and how they contribute to the psalm.
  
- Don't feel the need to recap the last X Psalms!
- ...or to deal with all the (possible) meanings of e.g. "Songs of Ascents"
- ...or to fill up the time. E.g. Ps.132 will inevitably take longer than say Pss.131 & 134; also, a theme may have been previously covered, allowing briefer treatment. A fifteen minute study (with plenty more time to pray) is not to be despised!

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## Appendix – Other Issues in Psalms Study

A number of further areas are raised by the study of the Psalms.

- ① Often stressed is the importance of **identifying the genre** of a psalm in the process of reading and interpretation. Undoubtedly the Psalms do largely divide into different categories which share certain characteristics, and it is valuable to consider them together - nevertheless, the actual benefits gained from this sort of classification are modest, and each psalm needs to be firstly and primarily considered on its own merits.

Different schemes are suggested:

- **Laments** (individual and corporate) and **Psalms of Praise** (descriptive, individual declarative and corporate-declarative) – *Westermann, an influential non-evangelical.*
- Psalms of **Praise, Prayer and Instruction** – *cautiously favoured by Grogan*
- **Laments** (individual and corporate), Psalms of **Thanksgiving** (individual and corporate), **Praise, Salvation-History, Celebration/Affirmation** (Covenant renewal, Royal Psalms, Enthronement Psalms, Zion Psalms), **Wisdom, Trust** – *Fee & Stuart*

The following is *Longman's* approach (as a sample, rather than as definitive)

Genre = "a group of texts similar in mood, content, structure or phraseology"

Modern E.g.s – biography, newspaper editorial, textbook, dissertation, novel, short story...

Genre determines 'reading strategy' (cf. difference between a letter & a systematic treatise)

- **Hymns.** Exuberant praise: < COMMON ELEMENTS: *call to worship, reasons for praise "for..."*, *further calls to worship*>. God as Creator, King, Deliverer of Israel; 'Zion Songs'.
- **Laments**(individual & corporate) 'the depths' (emotional opposite of Hymn, 'the heights'); Psalmist troubled by (i) his own thoughts / actions (ii) his enemies (iii) God himself (all in Ps.42-43); < COMMON ELEMENTS: *Invocation, plea for help, complaints, confession or assertion, curse upon enemies, confidence in God, Hymn/blessing*> Often move from sorrow to joy.
- **Thanksgiving Psalms** (response to an answered Lament). < COMMON ELEMENTS: *a blessing or intention to praise God, restatement of lament, account of salvation, thanksgiving/praise...*>
- **Psalms of Confidence** – expressing trust in God's goodness / power (this is an element in many psalms, but in these psalms it is the dominant element); trust asserted, despite the presence of a threat; imagery showing intimate awareness of God's presence.
- **Remembrance Psalms.** Refer to past redemptive acts, particularly (i) the Exodus – paradigm of salvation – and (ii) the establishment of the Davidic dynasty. The remembrance often leads on to praise or instruction.
- **Wisdom Psalms** (sharing themes with Proverbs, Job, Songs, Eccl.), e.g. concrete life-lessons (delight in God's Law); ordered creation; two ways to live (wicked / foolish vs. righteous / wise) with two outcomes (and apparent exceptions – when the wicked prosper...).
- **Kingship Psalms.** (i) The human king of Israel (ii) God as King, Divine Warrior (like Hymns).

"Go to the Psalms when you are happy and everything seems right with you. Sing laments to God when your life seems to crumble. When God hears your prayer, don't forget to thank him for his kindness. When you are frightened be encouraged by the psalms of confidence. Heed the psalms of wisdom. Above all, go to the psalms to be honest with God." (*Longman, Epilogue*)

- ② The **origin, development & final form / overall structure** of the Psalter – Briefly, there are 5 'books' (modelled on the 5 books of Moses? NB: books 2 & 3 predominantly refer to God as *Elohim*, books 1,4 & 5 use *Yahweh*); each book ends with a doxology; Ps.1 (& maybe Ps.2?) introduces the whole; the Hallelujah Psalms (145-50) form a fitting conclusion. Various groupings existed before final form (e.g. Ps.120-134; cf. Ps.72v20 with Ps.86 title!). Were some Psalms updated for ongoing relevance (e.g. 69v35)?
- ③ The status of the **psalm headings**. Some were added during the compilation process, others give historical background (Use of 3<sup>rd</sup> person ⇔ not by author?), or liturgical usage. Evangelical scholars disagree on whether or not these headings should be

considered part of the Bible text, and whether or not “of David” always refers to authorship – Longman suggests: “let the title initially inform the reading of the psalm, but do not bend the content unnaturally to fit the title.” Nevertheless, the NT takes them seriously and we have no ‘title-less’ form of the text (they form v1 in the Hebrew text). There is evidence that the titles are ancient (the LXX struggled to translate some of them).

- ④ The extent & way in which the Psalms were **used in public worship** – cf. 1Chr.16v4,7; Ps.92(title), Pss.120-34; 5v7, 66v13f, 63v2f. Ps.1 suggests a ‘wisdom context’.
- ⑤ **Mythological allusions:** Ps.74v12-14 – God does what the Canaanite & Babylonian gods Baal & Marduk are said to have done (the OT doesn’t *borrow* from pagan religions, but proclaims God’s superiority, 1Kg.18); Ps.48v2 – Zaphon = ‘Canaanite Olympus’, etc.

Discussion of such matters can be found in Kidner (vol.1), and in Grogan & Longman.

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## **Recommended Reading**

**Derek Kidner**, “Psalms” TOTC (Tyndale OT Commentary, IVP), 2Vols.

Kidner is a model commentator! His comments are incisive, accurate, thought provoking and amazingly concise; the tone is most wholesome. The treatment is brief (he certainly doesn’t deal with every question) but is an excellent help for preparation. Vol.1 contains an extensive introduction, which deals with various ‘scholarly approaches’ to the Psalms, and, amongst other things, gives a balanced consideration of the imprecatory psalms.

**Michael Wilcock**, “Psalms” BST (Bible Speaks Today, IVP). 2Vols.

Less technical, and more sermonical than Kidner, but nevertheless often helpful, and complementary. Wilcock emphasises the development and structure of the whole Psalter.

[longer academic commentaries, from a (broadly!) Evangelical point of view include the Word series (**Craigie, Tate, Allen**), the Expositor’s Bible Commentary (**Van Gemeren**), and the NIV Application Commentary on the Psalms (**Wilson**). These contain detail aplenty, but are often weak on actually applying the Psalm (particularly the Word volumes), and can raise more issues than they address]

Older commentaries may well be worth consulting – **Matthew Henry** and **Calvin** are highly regarded (and complementary). **Spurgeon’s** “Treasury of David” is a huge work, and may prove helpful, but it is time consuming to plough through. In any case, any of these older commentators need supplementing with a modern commentary – minimally Kidner.

A number of other general books on the Psalms are worth a mention:

*Prayer, Praise & Prophecy: A Theology of the Psalms* – **Geoffrey Grogan** (Christian Focus)

*How to Read the Psalms* – **Tremper Longman III** (IVP)

*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* – **Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart** (Scripture Union)

*The Messiah and the Psalms* – **Richard Belcher** (Christian Focus)