

Section 13: PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING PSALMS

I. Introduction to the Psalms

Waymeyer: “The Book of Psalms is a literary sanctuary, a place in Scripture where the people of God gather to worship, singing praise to their Redeemer in joyful adoration and crying out to Him from the depths of despair. As the divinely inspired hymnbook of the nation of Israel, Psalms contains words spoken *to* or *about* God rather than directly *from* God.”

Fee and Stuart: “This presents us with a unique problem of hermeneutics in Scripture. *How* do these words spoken *to* God function as a Word *from* God to us?”

According to Tremper Longman:

- The Psalms Inform Our Intellect
- The Psalms Arouse Our Emotions
- The Psalms Direct Our Wills

The purpose of this section is to determine how they do so by suggesting several guidelines for interpreting this unique genre of Scripture.

II. Guidelines for Interpreting Psalms

A. Interpret each psalm as a literary unit.

Each individual psalm is a literary unit and therefore “has a pattern of development by which its ideas are presented, developed, and brought to some kind of conclusion” (Fee and Stuart). For this reason, “one must be especially careful not to take individual verses out of context from a psalm, seeing them only in their own light, as if they did not need a context in which to be interpreted” (Fee and Stuart).

B. Interpret each psalm in light of its historical background.

When possible, the interpreter must discover the circumstances under which the psalm was written (who, what, where, when, why).

¹ Notes compiled from The Master’s Seminary and Matt Waymeyer Hermeneutics course, *Grasping God’s Word* (Duvall and Hays), and *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Roy Zuck).

In addition, many of the psalms contain introductory titles which “give information about the author, the historical occasion which prompted the writing, the melody, the psalm’s function and, occasionally, other matters” (Longman).

Scholars differ on whether these titles were part of the original psalm or added later, but they are generally regarded as historically reliable guides to the background of the psalm. For this reason, Psalm 63 should be interpreted in light of its historical background in 2 Samuel 15 (see page 27 above).

C. Interpret the psalms in light of their original function.

Fee and Stuart: “In ancient times the Psalms were commonly used as worship aids by the Israelites when they brought sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem.”

Even though most of the psalms cannot be dated with certainty or placed in a specific historical situation, they can be interpreted in light of this original function and therefore understood as a guide to worship for God’s people. Some psalms in particular – for example, the 15 “songs of ascents” (Ps 120-134) which were sung by worshipers as they approached Jerusalem and the temple – can be viewed as a call to corporate worship.

D. Interpret each psalm in light of its specific genre.

Waymeyer: “There is much variety in the Book of Psalms, and yet most scholars acknowledge that there are several specific types or genres of psalms which can be categorized according to their content, mood, structure, and/or phraseology.”

Studying the various genres of the psalms helps the interpreter see that the biblical authors had a specific intention in mind in writing what they did.

Wendland: “They wanted their prayer-songs to shape the motives and stimulate the emotions of the people who listened to them so that they would feel the same joy, wonder, sadness, frustration, or anger which the psalmist himself felt as he wrote. The psalmist’s feeling, or set of shifting feelings, corresponds to, or harmonizes with, the specific purpose for which the psalm was written.”

1. Psalms of Praise

These psalms are devoted to singing praise to God for the greatness and majesty of who He is. They usually contain the same basic three-part structure:

- A Call to Worship
- Specific Reasons to Praise God
- A Final Call to Praise Him

**The most important part of the psalm is the section where the psalmist states the reasons why God's people are to praise Him. The transition from the *call* to worship to the *reasons* for worship is often marked with the Hebrew conjunction *ki* (usually translated "for" or "because"):

- **Psalm 95:1-3:** "O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. *For* the LORD is a great God and a great King above all gods."
 - Examples: Psalms 8, 19, 66, 100, 103, 104, 113, 117, 145-150

2. Psalms of Lament

The Psalm of Lament is a cry of distress in which the psalmist expresses the suffering and disappointment of life in a fallen world. The complaints in these psalms are pointed in one of three directions: "They are directed toward either the unspecified enemy of the lamenter, the lamenter himself, or – most unsettling of all – toward God" (Longman).

Psalms of Lament often contain several of the following elements:

- The Invocation of God's Name
- A Plea to God for Help
- The Complaints that Motivated the Lament
- Confession of Sin or Assertion of Innocence
- The Curse of One's Enemies
- An Expression of Trust in God
- An Expression of Praise to God

The centerpiece of the lament is the complaint “because it is here that we learn what has motivated the lamenter to prayer” (Longman).

[SKIP]: Even though the overall mood of the lament is one of melancholy and despair, “there are one or two moments when the lamenter makes clear his basic trust in God” (Longman). Furthermore, as the lamenter recognizes the faithfulness of God, he often ends the psalm on a note of praise.

➤ Examples: Psalms 3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 120, 139, 142

3. **Psalms of Thanksgiving**

Waymeyer: “These psalms were used to express a deep-seated joy and gratitude to the Lord for His goodness and faithfulness to the psalmist in particular and to His chosen people in general, oftentimes for how God delivered them in some way. The centerpiece of these psalms, of course, is an expression of thanks, but they often contain four main stages.”

- A Declaration of Praise and Thanksgiving
- A Description of the Distress
- A Profession of Trust or Testimony of God’s Deliverance
- An Expression of Praise and Thanksgiving

➤ Examples: Psalms 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 65, 66, 75, 92, 107, 124, 136, 138

4. **Psalms of Confidence**

Waymeyer: “The primary feature of these psalms is an expression of trust in the goodness and power of God in spite of the presence of one’s enemies or some other threat. Even in the midst of such conditions, the psalmist is able to be at peace because the God of his confidence is with him. Perhaps the best known Psalm of Confidence is Psalm 23 where David expresses his trust in the Lord as his shepherd.”

➤ Examples: Psalms 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 91, 121, 125, 131

5. Psalms of Remembrance

In these psalms, the psalmist focuses his attention on God's previous acts of redemption and presents them as reason to give praise to the Lord. "Two events particularly are cited often: the Exodus, which could be called the paradigm salvation event of the Old Testament (Ps 77:16), and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty through covenant (Ps 88 and 132" (Longman), which ultimately looks ahead to the coming of Messiah.

➤ Examples: Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136

6. Psalms of Wisdom

Waymeyer: "Although wisdom is more often associated with books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, some psalms are specifically devoted to setting forth the path of wisdom, sometimes in contrast to the way of a fool."

➤ Examples: Psalms 1, 36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133

7. Psalms of Royalty

These psalms focus either on Israel's earthly human ruler – the Lord's chosen or anointed one – or on God Himself as King over the entire earth. The former often consist of petitions to the Lord for His help on the king's behalf or for His blessing on the king in some special way, whereas the latter extol Yahweh as the glorious King who rules over all the nations (Wendland). Many of these royal psalms are viewed as prophetic in nature because they are believed to refer "either directly or indirectly to the coming Messiah, God's anointed Savior" (Wendland).

➤ Examples: Psalms 2, 21, 45, 47, 67, 89, 96-99, 101

E. Interpret each psalm in light of its poetic nature.

Waymeyer: "Because the psalms consist of poetry, they are distinct from other genres of literature and must be interpreted in light of their poetic nature."

Fee and Stuart: "One needs to be aware that Hebrew poetry, by its very nature, was addressed, as it were, to the mind through the heart (i.e.,

much of the language is intentionally emotive). Therefore, one needs to be careful of over-exegeting the Psalms by finding special meanings in every word or phrase, where the poet may have intended none.”

In addition, the interpreter must take into consideration the two most common characteristics of Hebrew poetry: the use of parallelism and the use of symbolic language.

POETIC PARALLELISM

The dominant feature in Hebrew poetry is poetic parallelism in which one line of the poem corresponds with another line, or sometimes with several others. There are seven main types of poetic parallelism used in the Book of Psalms:

1. **Synonymous Parallelism**

Synonymous parallelism consists of “the repetition of the same thought in two different phrases using two different, yet closely related, sets of words” (Longman). In this way, the second line of the pair repeats the idea of the first line without making any significant addition or subtraction to it.

▪ **19:1:** The heavens are telling of the glory of God
and
Their expanse is declaring the work of His hands

▪ **19:2:** Day to day pours forth speech
and
Night to night reveals knowledge

➤ *See Psalm 2:1-5 for a series of consecutive uses of synonymous parallelism.*

2. **Antithetic Parallelism**

Waymeyer: “With antithetic parallelism, the second line is set in contrast to the idea of the first line, usually by means of the adversative conjunction ‘but.’ This often consists of a restatement of the idea of the first line by asserting its opposite (i.e., both lines state the same idea but in antithetical ways).”

- **1:6:** The Lord knows the way of the righteous
but
The way of the wicked will perish
- **145:20:** The Lord keeps all who love Him
but
All the wicked, He will destroy

3. **Synthetic Parallelism**

Waymeyer: “Synthetic parallelism is a form of synonymous parallelism in which the second line completes, advances, or develops the thought of the first line by supplying additional ideas.”

- **23:6:** Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me
all the days of my life
➤ and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever
- **80:19:** O LORD God of hosts, restore us
➤ Cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved

4. **Emblematic Parallelism**

Waymeyer: “In emblematic parallelism, one line is figurative and the other is literal, and together they form a simile with the word ‘like’ or ‘as’ introducing one of the lines (usually the figurative one).”

- **42:1:** As the deer pants for the water brooks
so
My soul pants for Thee, O God
- **58:7:** Let them flow away
like
Water that runs off

5. **Climactic Parallelism**

Sometimes known as stepladder, staircase, or repetitive parallelism, this form “begins with a statement in the first phrase which is

partially repeated in the second but carried further than it would in synonymous parallelism” (Longman).

For this reason, climactic parallelism could be viewed as a more complex form of synthetic parallelism.

- **29:1-2:** Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty
 - Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength
 - Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to His name
 - Worship the LORD in holy array

- **3:1-2:** O LORD, how many are my foes!
 - Many are rising against me
 - Many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God

6. Chiasm

Waymeyer: “Chiasm is a literary technique in which a series of lines or themes are tied together structurally because the first one is parallel to the last one, the second is parallel to the second to last one, and so forth.”

- **76:1:**
 - a In Judah
 - b God is known
 - b’ His name is great
 - a’ in Israel.

A chiasm can be very simple (like Psalm 76:1 above), or it can be very lengthy and complex. Sometimes the chiasm has a central element which is being highlighted as the centerpiece or key emphasis of the chiasm (e.g., a-b-c-d-E-d’-c’-b’-a’) and other times the chiasm is designed to highlight some other point of emphasis in the psalm. See David Dorsey’s *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* for an extended discussion.

7. Inclusio

Waymeyer: “Inclusio is a form of poetic parallelism which uses repetition in a psalm to bind its parts together. It consists not of the repetition of phrases within a line, but rather the repetition of an entire line (or at least a key concept in the line) at the beginning and the end of the psalm. The purpose of these bookends is not merely

to provide a sense of closure at the end, but also to alert the reader to the main theme of the entire psalm and thereby impart a sense of unity. In this way, the line (or concept) which is repeated not only introduces and concludes the psalm, it also summarizes the main point of everything in between.”

- **8:1a and 9:** O LORD, our Lord,
How majestic is Your name in all the earth
- **106:1a and 48d:** Praise the LORD!
- **107:1 and 43b:** Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

Consider the lovingkindnesses of the LORD.

SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE IN THE PSALMS

Waymeyer: “One of the most common features of poetry is the use of symbolic language in which the biblical author departs from the literal meaning of words and uses imagery to communicate with greater effect. The following are some of the more common figures of speech found in the Psalms.”

1. **Simile:** a comparison between two things in which the one is explicitly said to resemble the other with the use of the word “like” or “as”
 - **1:3:** “He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water”
 - **42:1:** “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Your, O God”
2. **Metaphor:** a comparison between two things in which the one is said to *be* the other with the use of a form of the verb “to be”
 - **22:6:** “I am a worm”
 - **84:11:** “For the Lord is a sun and shield”
3. **Hypocatastasis:** a comparison between two things in which the one is directly named as the other

- **22:16:** “For dogs have surrounded me”
 - **80:1:** “Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel”
4. **Hyperbole:** a deliberate exaggeration designed to add emphasis or increase the effect of what is said
- **6:6:** “I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears”
 - **18:29:** “By You I can run upon a troop; and by my God I can leap over a wall”
5. **Personification:** the ascribing of human characteristics or actions to inanimate objects or ideas
- **77:16:** “The waters saw You, God...they were in anguish”
 - **93:3:** “The floods have lifted up their voice”
6. **Anthropomorphism:** the ascribing of human characteristics or actions to God
- **8:3:** “the work of Your fingers”
7. **Metonymy:** the substitution of the name of one thing for that of another closely associated with it
- **23:5:** “You prepare a table before me”
 - **24:4:** “He who has clean hands and a pure heart”
8. **Synecdoche:** a figure of speech in which a part of something is used to refer to the whole (or vice versa)
- **44:6:** “I will not trust in my bow, nor will my sword save me”
 - **118:10:** “All nations surrounded me”

9. **Apostrophe:** a figure of speech in which the psalmist interrupts his discourse to speak directly to some absent person or thing as though actually present and capable of listening
- **2:10:** “Now, therefore, O kings, show discernment; take warning O judges of the earth”
 - **6:8:** “Depart from me, all you who do iniquity, for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping”

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY:

- Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

Section 14: THE USE OF SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

I. Introduction to Symbolic Language

Waymeyer: “Our general approach to understanding the Bible is to take it literally. This does not mean, however, that we fail to recognize the use of symbolic language in the pages of Scripture, for the Bible – just like most pieces of written literature – often uses symbolic language. The purpose of this section is to learn how to recognize symbolic language when we encounter it and how to understand its significance in a given context.”

II. How to Recognize Symbolic Language

Bernard Ramm: “Whenever we read a book, an essay, or a poem we presume the literal sense in the document until the nature of the literature may force us to another level. This is the only conceivable method of beginning or commencing to understand literature of all kinds.”

Wendland: “This sort of language occurs quite often in the Bible including both poetic and nonpoetic passages. How else can humans conceive of, talk about, or understand the unseen and almighty Lord of the universe, except in terms of their own experiences? We have to depend on human language, inadequate though it is, to derive and develop our understanding of God’s nature, and this is why we liken the Indescribable One to a mere mortal.”

Not only is this the only conceivable approach, but it also reflects the reality that symbolic language is a departure from the literal, and not vice versa. Our firm

starting point in studying the Bible, then, is to assume that the language we are reading should be taken literally unless something in the passage requires us to consider a symbolic interpretation.

The Starting Point:

Begin by assuming the literal interpretation.

However, how do we recognize symbolic language when we encounter it? To determine whether or not the language in question is symbolic, the interpreter must ask the following questions:

A. Does it possess some degree of *absurdity* when taken literally?

Waymeyer: “The literal meaning of symbolic language ought to cause the interpreter to scratch his head and ask, ‘But how can this be?’ In other words, there is something inherent in symbolic language that compels the interpreter to seek something other than a literal meaning.”

Walt Kaiser: “Would the statement be absurd or even contradictory to the rest of revelation or the usual order of creation if one took the statement literally?” If so, the statement is quite possibly symbolic.

B. Does it possess some degree of *clarity* when taken symbolically?

Waymeyer: “Symbolic language effectively communicates what it symbolizes. In other words, when you conclude that the literal meaning of the language is absurd and ought to be abandoned, a symbolic interpretation should yield some degree of clarity to the meaning of the language of the text. With symbolic language, then, the meaning intended by the symbolism is essentially clear and understandable.”

C. Does it fall into an established *category* of symbolic language?

Kaiser: Figures of speech are “*legitimate departures* from the normal use of words for special purposes. Thus, they are limited in number; they can be described, named, and defined in accordance with known examples.”

Therefore, if you think that a biblical writer may be using symbolic language, determine whether the language in question falls into an established category of such language. Some of the more common figures of speech include the following:

- **Simile:** a comparison between two things in which the one is explicitly said to resemble the other with the use of the word “like” or “as”
 - “All of us like sheep have gone astray” (Isa 53:6).
 - “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God” (Ps 42:1).

- **Metaphor:** a comparison between two things in which the one is said to *be* the other with the use of a form of the verb “to be”
 - “For the Lord is a sun and shield” (Ps 84:11).
 - “These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved” (2 Pet 2:17).

- **Hypocatastasis:** a comparison between two things in which the one is directly named as the other
 - “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29).
 - “A lion has gone up from his thicket, and a destroyer of nations has set out; he has gone out from his place to make your land a waste” (Jer 4:7).

- **Hyperbole:** a deliberate exaggeration designed to add emphasis or increase the effect of what is said
 - “I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears” (Ps 6:6).
 - “Saul and Jonathan...were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions” (2 Sam 1:23).

- **Personification:** the ascribing of human characteristics or actions to inanimate objects or ideas
 - “Sheol from beneath is excited over you to meet you” (Isa 14:9)
 - “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55)

- **Anthropomorphism:** the ascribing of human characteristics or actions to God
 - “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained...” (Ps 8:3).
 - “For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His” (2 Chron 16:9).

FOR EXAMPLE: The Trees of Isaiah 55:12:
“All the trees of the field will clap their hands.”

- **Does this possess a degree of *absurdity* when taken literally?**

Yes, for how is it that literally trees could clap their hands?

- **Does this possess a degree of *clarity* when taken symbolically?**

Yes, for when understood symbolically, it clearly and effectively communicates that Israel’s return from exile will be a time of great rejoicing.

- **Does it fall into an established category of symbolic language?**

Yes, for it contains an obvious example of *personification* in which the trees are pictured as people who are rejoicing by clapping their hands.

Questions:

What about the “1000 years” in Revelation 20:1-6?

How about the “great chain” in Revelation 20:1?

How about the “fire” in Revelation 20:9?

III. How to Interpret Symbolic Language

Once the interpreter has identified a given expression or statement as being symbolic, he must then determine the significance of the language intended by the biblical author. To do so, he may find it helpful to ask the following questions:

A. Is its significance indicated in the immediate context?

In some cases, symbolic language is used in a given passage and the significance of that language is indicated in the near context.

- In Revelation 1 the apostle John sees seven golden lampstands (v. 12) and seven stars (v. 16). What does the immediate context indicate about the significance of the lampstands and the stars?
- In Ezekiel 37:1-10, the prophet describes a scene in which dry bones are resurrected. What does the immediate context indicate about the significance of the dry bones?
- In Psalm 23:1, David writes, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Where in the immediate context does David identify the ways in which the Lord is like a shepherd?
- In Philippians 3:2, the Apostle Paul writes, “Beware of the dogs.” What do the two commands that immediately follow indicate about the identity of these dogs?

B. Is the writer making an allusion to earlier revelation?

In some cases, the key to drawing out the significance of symbolic language is to recognize that the writer of Scripture is referencing earlier revelation.

- In John 1:29, John the Baptist refers to Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” an obvious reference to texts such as Exodus 12:1-36, Isaiah 53:7, and Leviticus 14:12-21.
- In Revelation 5:5, the apostle John refers to someone as “the Root of David,” an allusion to Isaiah 11:1 and 10 and Jeremiah 23:5.

C. Is there a consistent use of that symbol in Scripture?

If there is a consistent use of a given symbol in Scripture – or even simply a *precedent* for the symbol being used in a certain way – this may provide insight to the interpreter as he seeks the author’s intended meaning.

- “Sheep” and “the flock” often refer to believers or the church (Matt 25:32-33; Luke 12:32; John 10:1-27; Acts 20:28-29; Heb 13:20; 1 Peter 5:2-3).
- “Wolves” often refer to false teachers or those who threaten believers (Matt 7:15; 10:16; Luke 10:3; Acts 20:29).

D. Does the cultural background of a key word or concept shed light on the significance of the symbolic language?

- In Psalm 22:16 and Philippians 3:2, certain individuals are referred to as “dogs.” Understanding how dogs were viewed (or even what role they played) in that particular culture may be helpful in determining the significance of the symbol.
- In Matthew 11:29, Jesus exhorts His would-be followers to take His “yoke” upon them. Understanding what exactly a “yoke” was and how it functioned in that culture is essential for understanding the meaning of His exhortation.

E. If the figure of speech is one of comparison (e.g., a simile, metaphor, or hypo-catastasis), can an obvious point of comparison be determined?

Psalm 1:3 “He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.”

John 10:9 “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.”

Walt Kaiser: “Figures of speech can be a joy to the interpreter. But we must never label an expression as a figure of speech just to avoid difficulties. One has never settled an issue by proclaiming with a wave of the hand or shrug of the shoulder, ‘Oh, that is just a figurative. We need not bother with it!’”

For a discussion of various metaphors used by the Apostle Paul, see David J. Williams’s *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character*.