Patterns for Life:
Structure, Genre, and Theology in Psalms

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Form Analysis and Genre

After a period of focusing on the historical background of the biblical text, early in the twentieth century biblical scholars refocused their attention on the biblical text itself. One of the first and most significant developments that emerged from that shift was the recognition that many of the Psalms have recurring patterns of structure, flow of thought, and even themes and compositional techniques. From this recognition, scholars developed a field of study called **form criticism** or "analysis of forms" (for an example of form analysis in prophetic literature, see The Prophetic "Call" Narrative: Commissioning for Service).

This method of study begins with the understanding that aspects of any particular culture that occur at regular and repeated occasions, such as religious practices, tend to take on stable forms or structure. We can see this in most modern services of worship, where the flow of the service is relatively predictable since many aspects of the service are repeated from week to week. And in many cases, for example, we can even predict with a great deal of accuracy the precise words a certain person will use in prayer. This is why many churches develop an Order of Worship to structure these recurring elements.

None of this is negative; it is just the phenomenon of social interaction among people. We tend to respond to cues that are familiar and recognizable, and those cues signal to us far more than simply what the words themselves say. They evoke a whole range of thought or feeling or experience, simply because they are familiar and repeated. We can even make jokes about the familiarity of some of these forms. I recall the comment, with a certain degree of truth behind it, that when a certain pastor came to the point of his sermon where he said, "in conclusion," everyone knew that meant only thirty more minutes of preaching!

One of the most obvious uses of these forms is in prayers, simply because they are repeated so often. Especially prayers before meals tend to take on a ritual quality with the same words or phrases used repeatedly. Again, this is not necessarily negative, because such repetition gives structure to the occasion and provides cues to people that certain activities are taking place and certain responses are expected.

Since the Psalms, the Psalter, is a collection of prayers of the community of Faith, it is not at all surprising that we should find such structure, repetition, and conventional methods of expression in them. Even though there is a great deal of variety in the Psalms, there is also a great deal that is shared, from major structural elements, to standardized ways of referring to problems facing individuals or the community, to expressing cries for help in the form of petitions to God. It is this structure that gives evidence that the Psalms were part of the public spiritual life of ancient Israel, as well as providing us with some tools to understand better the theological importance and communication of these prayers.

As scholars studied the Psalms from this perspective, they discovered that there were certain types of psalms that followed a fairly stable structural pattern. They begin to group the Psalms according to these patterns into categories they termed **genre** (JAHN-ruh). Much of the early study still operated under the assumptions of the primacy of historical investigation. So effort tended to focus on trying to recover the original setting in the life of ancient Israel (*Sitz im Leben*) in which each Psalm was originally used. However, interest shifted increasingly toward the biblical text itself as a literary document. As a result, there was a growing realization that, at best, the attempt to reconstruct the historical setting of the psalms

was largely speculation, and was not as helpful as understanding the dynamic within the Psalm itself as representative of a particular genre.

So, there is not as much focus on the "original" life setting of a psalm, except in limited ways as some continue to explore the liturgical setting of the psalms. Yet, the concern with the genre of the Psalms has itself proven a valuable tool in understanding the Psalms, simply because we understand that the form of the psalms is related to their function. That is, a lament psalm that expresses pain to God and asks for help takes on a certain pattern for addressing God, for presenting the problem, for moving to petition, and then affirming trust. The form of this kind of prayer provided the structure in which to express these feelings.

The recognition that a particular psalm is unfolding on the pattern of a lament tells us the function of the psalm even apart from the particular words that are being used. It also gives clues to how to understand some of the stereotypical language that is a recurring feature of lament psalms. That also gives important clues about how to understand the images, metaphors, or other literary features of the text. The form serves the function of the prayer, and that form is a way into the meaning of the psalm for us today.

Before we turn to a survey of the various forms, a couple of observations are important. **First**, the "form" or pattern of a psalm is not just a series of fixed elements to which all psalms of that type rigidly adhere. There is a great deal of variety and freedom in the composition of individual psalms. The idea of genre is simply a way students of the bible have identified and grouped those elements that tend to recur in certain psalms. In other words, the genre is simply descriptive of the psalms that have been preserved in our canon of Scripture, an attempt to identify those recurring elements. There are no "pure" forms, although some psalms demonstrate the elements better than others. The writers felt a great deal of freedom in composing these prayers, and did not rigidly hold to a prescribed form. This is understandable when we realize that the psalms were not originally produced primarily as pieces of literature to be preserved, but as elements of worship in the ongoing life a living community of faith.

Second, there is little historical setting available for most of these psalms, especially in the headings or superscriptions that seem to provide such information. A careful analysis of the psalms with historical superscriptions that place them in a historical setting will reveal that the psalm itself following that heading most often will give no details that connect it directly with that setting. Also, we have learned that the headings were probably not part of the original compositions, but were added to the text later (the superscriptions are not counted as part of the psalm in the Hebrew Bible). This suggests that the headings serve other purposes than to provide the "real" historical context for a psalm. They serve much more to historicize a prayer, to provide an example of a historical situation in which such a prayer should or could be prayed. Therefore, we should not use the heading or the superscriptions of a psalm as a primary interpretive tool for the psalm. Yet, they may provide us valuable clues to the theological purpose to which certain psalms were put to use in the community of faith.

Still, the historical or cultural setting of a psalm itself can be significant, particularly if the setting is related to the particular form, or if specific historical elements are clearly present within the psalm itself. For example, it is important for understanding the perspective and theology of Psalm 137 to know that it comes from the period of the Babylonian exile. It is important in other psalms, for example Psalm 2, to know that the psalm comes from a particular cultural and historical context in the life of Israel, in this case the crowning of a new king. That cultural and historical background is important for understanding the impact of the psalm as a certain genre of psalm, but also in establishing parameters of meaning for the theology of the psalm.

In all study of psalms, the fact that they were prayers set to music, intended to be sung by the worshipper, must be kept in mind. The psalms are worship material, much as our modern prayer books or hymnals. And worship is a dynamic activity. Prayer is most often a response to experience, and that experience of the people as a part of a worshipping community must govern any study or application of the Psalms. This material was not written to communicate abstract, propositional theology for us. It was written to facilitate people coming to God from all the turmoil of life, good and bad. This material is emotive poetry set to

music in the form of prayers. Any interpretation that loses sight of that fact will likely misunderstand the meaning and impact of this material.

Types of Psalms

While the 150 Psalms of our canon are widely diverse, and some will not fit into categories easily or are conflated from more than one type, most of the Psalms of the Psalter can be classified into three basic types: **laments**, ***todah*** or **thanksgiving**, and **hymn**. There is also a significant relation between these three types as well as their setting and function within the Psalter that will be discussed below.

Lament Psalms

I. Address to God, Invocation
  a) first person address to God (I, you)
  b) an initial plea
II. Complaint to God
  a) description of problem, questions asked of God
  b) crisis of any kind; in *penitential psalms* it is sin
  c) claim of innocence
  d) often includes an initial plea for help
  e) condemnation of "wicked" or "enemy"
III. Affirmation of Trust
  a) "But as for me" or "Nevertheless"
  b) turning point of the psalm; theological focus
IV. Petition
  a) plea for God's intervention
  b) often uses the words "save" or "deliver"
V. Acknowledgment of Response
  a) assurance of hearing
  b) vow of praise, worship
VI. Doxology: blessings, praise

The function of a **Lament** or **Psalm of Petitionary Praise** (Westermann), is to provide a structure for crisis, hurt, grief, or despair; to move a worshipper from hurt to joy, from darkness to light, from desperation to hope. This movement from hurt to joy is not a psychological or liturgical experience only, although it includes those. And it is not a physical deliverance from the crisis, although that is often anticipated. The movement "out of the depths" from hurt to joy is a profoundly spiritual one.

Since laments are the most emotionally charged of the psalms, they exhibit a wide variety of composition to deal with the range of crises that they address. Yet at the same time they also follow most closely the basic elements found in most lament psalms. This relative stability of structure provides a framework within which to express the deepest of human emotion.

Individuals or the community can pray laments (see the article A Prayer of Hope for an example of a community lament outside the Psalter). Some laments were written for the king to pray on behalf on the community or nation. There is little difference theologically between individual and community laments, especially since the same metaphors occur in both, the structure is similar, and the same theological conclusions are expressed in both.

A lament arises from an immediate crisis or emotional state that faces the worshipper. This can range from physical threat either externally (an invading army) or internally (physical illness), to interpersonal conflict with others in the community, to betrayal or injustices perpetrated by friends or family. All of these can be referred to metaphorically as "the enemy" or "foes," even when the crisis is physical illness. This becomes a stereotypical way of describing any crisis that threatens or diminishes the vitality of life. In this same

vein, “death” is a frequent metaphor for this crisis, whether or not the crisis is physically life threatening. Also the metaphor of water, drawn from the cultural language of the Ba’al myths where water is the metaphorical imagery of chaos that threatens the order and stability of the world, frequently occurs to describe the problem facing a person of the community.

The theological significance of a lament is that it expresses a trust in God in the absence of any evidence that He is active in the world. Through a sequential and deliberate structure, the lament moves from articulation of the emotion of the crisis, to petition for God to intervene, to an affirmation of trust in God even though there has been no immediate deliverance from the crisis (see the Sermon on Psalm 22).

There are two specialized types of lament psalms that deserve particular attention, **Penitential Psalms** and **Imprecatory Psalms**.

There are seven psalms that the church has traditionally understood as **Penitential Psalms**, prayers specifically for forgiveness from sins committed (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143; see also Jer. 14:1-10). While there is contact in some psalms with the cultural idea that sickness or tragedy is the result of sin in the life of a person or the community, most laments do not approach the crisis from the perspective of sin. Instead, they appeal to God as protector of the weak and defender of the oppressed, drawing on traditional understandings of God built from the exodus experience.

However, in these seven psalms moral or covenantal failure is at the heart of the lament. The prayer is specifically for forgiveness for that failure, even when the immediate problem is some other crisis. While there may be petition for deliverance from those other problems, the forgiveness of sin is at the heart of the prayer.

The **Imprecatory Psalms** or **Cursing Psalms** are a much more radical version of the lament. In this handful of psalms, there are curses pronounced on those who have caused the crisis. Sometimes these are people within the community who have committed injustice, and sometimes people outside who, like the Babylonians, have invaded the country and brought destruction on the nations (Psa 137).

While these psalms are not positive and pious, like all laments they are honest expressions of pain in the face of grief and endings. We should not attempt to “Christianize” these psalms by pretending they are something they are not. Yet neither can we exclude them as “sub-Christian.” Rather, we need to take them seriously as a valid biblical response to God in prayer from the depths of our humanity. Since we accept these psalms as Scripture for the church, we need to allow them to inform our theology rather than using our theology to change the psalms.

Thanksgiving or *Todah* Psalms

I. Summary of the Testimony of the Psalmist
  a) recalls plea for help
  b) recounts God’s intervention
II. Narration of the Psalmist’s experience
  a) the original problem
  b) the cry for help
  c) God’s deliverance
III. Acknowledgement of God’s aid in Praise/Thanks
  a) worship, with the word *todah*: praise, sacrifice, blessings
  b) cry of praise

The function of a **Thanksgiving** or ***Todah* Psalm**, or **Psalm of Declarative Praise** (Westermann) is to praise God for something He has done for the Psalmist, to offer thanksgiving in the form of worship. There are three main aspects to *Todah* Psalms: 1) praise for a deed God has done or an experience of God by the Psalmist; 2) it is an immediate response evoked by God’s action; 3) the tone is one of joy. This is not a

general attitude of thankfulness in most cases, but an outpouring of emotive celebration in worship based on some immediate experience of God's goodness and grace.

Thanksgiving is the next step after lament. In lament, the petitions are brought to God with an affirmation that he will act. The thanksgiving prayer is the response to God's actions, acknowledging that he has heard the petition and answered in some way that has been experienced by the worshipper. However, the word *todah* that is characteristic of these psalms in Hebrew is not directly equivalent to "thanks," even thought it is usually translated that way. In some sense the term "thanksgiving" is more an adaptation to English that it is an accurate description of this type of Psalm.

The sequence of **lament-*todah*** is not "please-thank you," but **petition-praise**. "Thanks" is only one aspect of the praise of *todah*, and is a way to give content to the praise. But the real impact of *todah* is that God is acknowledged as the source of all goodness in life. This moves *todah* psalms to theological confession rather than simply "thanks" for positive experience.

Todah is really a kind of praise offered to God that arises out of personal or communal experience yet in the context of overall commitment to God. The experiential dimension of *todah* psalms is easily seen in the middle section of the psalm as the worshipper recounts or gives testimony of his experience. This fact places this "thanksgiving" firmly in community worship as a visible sign of praise to God for his grace.

There are also two specialized types of *todah* psalms that deserve special attention, the **Salvation History Psalms** and **Songs of Trust**.

Salvation History psalms recount in some way the story of God's creation of the people of Israel. Most often, this includes an abbreviated version of the exodus story, concluding with praise to God for his deliverance, or calling the people to respond in praise and faithfulness to God's grace. These tend to be more theologically reflective than other psalms, since they move to exhortation based on Israel's experience of God in her history. However, they can also call for praise that comes very close to hymn.

The **Songs of Trust** are *todah* psalms that move even closer to hymn. There is still some sense of the immediate experience of God, yet they usually are focused more on reflective praise that is generalized into affirmations about God. They are experience generalized to trust.

Hymnic Psalms

I. Call to Praise
  a) uses an imperative
  b) addressed to the community (plural)
II. Reason for Praise
  a) "because" or "for"
  b) God described with participial clause, "God, who [activity]"
  c) God's deliverance
III. Renewed Call to Praise (balances beginning)
  a) uses an imperative
  b) addressed to the community (plural)

The function of a **Hymn** or **Psalm of Descriptive Praise** (Westermann) is to praise God because He *is* God, and we know He is because we have cried to Him and He has acted. While Thanksgiving Psalms *begin* with deliverance of God in history and end in praise, hymns *assume* deliverance and God's actions in history, and praise God for being the kind of God who acts in certain ways.

Hymns are one step removed from dynamic contact with God's actions in history and are not in response to any particular or immediate experience of God. While they are firmly grounded in the understanding that

God has acted in the past in the lives of people and the community, hymns have moved beyond the immediate experience to a stability in life that allows reflection on the nature and character of God as the one who delivers and provides. There is lacking the deep emotion of the laments, as well as the immediacy of testimony. Yet there is a calm depth to these psalms that expresses that stability of life that comes from understanding and reflecting on the journey of faith, and is willing to declare a truth about God based on that journey.

While not related to immediate experience, Hymns still exhibit features of description, the reason or ground for praise. Yet, they often move to **Doxology**, a type of hymn in which there is usually no reason given for the praise. There is simply a repeated call to offer praise to God. Doxology moves to the most abstract form of praise, where God is honored in joyful abandon simply because he is God.

But even here, this should not be understood as praise more "pure" than other types of praise. It is not that this type of praise has any more value in the biblical traditions than any other type. In fact, the occurrence of doxology is far more infrequent than either *todah* or lament. And, as outlined in the summary section below, even doxology is tied directly to the God's actions in the past, and to the cycle of lament-todah-hymn that marks the biblical collection of prayers in the form of Psalms. This ought to raise some cautions about drawing superficial conclusion about praise from either hymn or doxology.

There are several other types of Psalms that are well represented in the Psalter. They do not exhibit a stable pattern and so are usually grouped by topic and content rather than by internal structure. That also allows a few to fit into one category by structure and another by topic.

One of the largest groups of these are the **Liturgical Psalms**, so called because they were most likely used in special festivals or services of worship in the life of Ancient Israel. For example, the **Royal Psalms** likely had their original setting in the coronation of Israel's king. While they were preserved and adapted to other uses long after the monarchy came to an end, the remnants of their original purpose is often obvious and helps understand some of the features in the Psalms. The **Covenant Psalms** may have had their original setting in an annual covenant renewal ceremony, while the **Songs of Zion** and the **Temple Liturgies** could be used for any of several festivals celebrated in Jerusalem.

Two final specialized types are related in that both are reflective and come closer to being theological treatise than prayer. Again these are grouped by similar topics and concerns rather than a shared structure or form.

Wisdom Psalms are so called because they share features with the Wisdom traditions of the Old Testament (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) in terms of literary structures, vocabulary, and concepts. They frequently deal with topics such as the injustices of life and the justice of God, the responsibilities of choosing the correct path or manner of living, the relative value of riches, and the transitory nature of human existence.

Poems of the Law, which includes the lengthy Psalm 119, are simply psalms that reflect on the value of living life by the instructions of God preserved in the *torah*. In theme, these are close to thanksgiving psalms, in that the torah is celebrated as a gracious gift of God whereby he provides instructions for living life well in the world that he has created. The call to faithfulness to these instructions, in terms of being blessed or suffering consequences, picks up convenantal themes as well, but moves more closely to the "blessings" of life that come from accepting responsibility that is a feature of the Wisdom writings.

Concluding Observations and Theological Implications

The theological implications of the Psalter are far too extensive to deal with here, and really only emerge fully from close examination of the Psalms themselves. However, there are two concluding observations that are important in any theological reflection on these prayers.

Modes of Praise

The psalms of the Psalter express praise in different modes, depending on the life situation of the worshipper or community. These different modes of praise each express a different perspective on God in relation to life experience. This reveals that the psalms conceive God, not in static categories of being or ultimate reality, but in dynamic terms that see God active and interactive in human affairs.

Much of our modern concept of praise is shaped by images of positive emotive expression ("let's just praise the Lord"), often in the context of feeling good or expressing happiness in public worship. Yet, the Psalter teaches us that praise in the mode of lament is just as important as praise in the mode of doxology. In fact, there are far more lament psalms than of any other type. And they are all collected together into a prayer book whose very name in Hebrew, *tehillim*, means "praises."

This suggests that our modern ideas of praise as a positive emotion are much too narrowly conceived. It also suggests that laments, with all the pain, grief, despair, even anger that they express, are just as much acts of worship and faithfulness to God as are the more socially acceptable and popular positive expression of hymns. This fact is a crucial theological truth that is in danger of being lost in some circles of the church that only values the positive. The simple fact is, not all of life is positive, but all of life comes under God in these prayers.

The Dynamic of Faith: Life Journeys in the Psalms

Related to this same misconception about praise is the idea frequently expressed, openly or subtly, that "good" Christians should end up in doxology or "pure" praise, and then remain there as a sign of spiritual maturity. The implication is that anything less indicates spiritual problems. But if the above observation about the use of these prayers is valid, this perspective is distorted at best. It is simply not how life works. And one of the most important aspects of Psalms that have value for us today is that they are life oriented.

There is a flow and a rhythm in the use of these prayers that is even reflected in how the Psalter itself is organized. The Psalter contains psalms that were composed over at least an 800 year span in Israel's history. And the book itself is composite, showing clear signs of being compiled over a long period of time (see Introducing the Psalms). Yet, there is still some overall flow to the book. Much of the first part of the Psalter is composed of laments, *todah* psalms are more frequent later, while hymns occur more toward the end. The conclusion of the Psalter is a collection of doxologies.

This suggests that the sequence **lament-todah-hymn** is a deliberate progression. That is, lament (petition) leads to thanksgiving that leads to hymn. While that may seem to suggest that the end of proper worship, and Christian living, should be doxology, when we consider that these prayers were a dynamic expression of the life and experience of the worshipping community, a deeper perspective emerges.

Two Old Testament scholars have made observations about the Psalter that are helpful here. Claus Westermann has described the Psalms in terms of the unifying element of praise, supporting the observation above that the psalms are simply different modes of praise.

Petitionary Praise
  Lament
    God will act
Declarative Praise
  Thanksgiving/*todah*
    God has acted
Descriptive Praise
  Hymn
    God is God (we know He is God because we cried to Him and He acted)

There is a sequence to this understanding of the Psalms whereby the attitude expressed in Hymn becomes the basis for a new petition, a new Lament. Walter Brueggemann picks up this dimension and describes the psalms in terms of the dynamic of life experiences.

Old Orientation
Hymn
The stability of life in which nothing threatens the status quo
Disorientation
Lament
Crisis precipitated by circumstances that threaten or challenge stability of life
Reorientation
Thanksgiving
Crisis is resolved, a new trust in God is expressed in terms of resolution of crisis
New Orientation (that becomes Old Orientation)
Hymn
Return to stability of life in which nothing threatens the *status quo*

This clearly illustrates that hymn and doxology are not the "end" of faith in God or Christian living, but part of the process of life. We may be at various points in that process, and therefore praying certain kinds of prayers at a particular moment. But the fact that one is at doxology is not necessarily the measure of spiritual "success." It may simply be where the journey of life has led at a particular moment. Life is dynamic and presents us with challenges in terms of crises or events that threaten our sense of stability, order, and well- being. And yet the range of psalms provides the structure for a theological response at each juncture of experience, so that no aspect of life falls outside a worshipful response to God.

It is not that we must strive to achieve a life of doxology. As desirable as that might be on some level, life will most likely not let that kind of stability last very long. The prayers of the Psalter, while showing a progression from lament to doxology, also suggest that the progression is related more to the seasons of life and a never ending journey of faithful response to God. Thanksgiving, hymn and doxology provide the basis for new Lament. It is that dynamic relationship between them that is crucial in understanding the Psalter. And it is this dynamic related to the fluidity of life itself that makes the Psalms so valuable as a structure for response to God in worshipping communities today.

For further reading:

Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg, 1984.
Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, Augsburg, 1980.
Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, John Knox, 1981.
Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd. ed., Westminster, 2000.