

Interpreting Psalms

You can find psalms not just in the Book of Psalms, but across the Hebrew Bible. Here are some examples (which have been mentioned in some of the other handouts) ...

Law	Exodus 15:1-18 and 20-21, Numbers 21:17-18 and 27-30, Deuteronomy 31:30 – 32:44 (Song of Moses)
Prophets	Judges 5, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, 2 Samuel 1:17-27, ch. 22, Isaiah 5, Jeremiah 11:18-20, 18:18-23, 20:7-18 (“confessions”) Jeremiah 16:19-20, 33:10-11 (cf examples from 2 Chronicles) Ezekiel 28:11-23, 32:1-16, Jonah 2, Habbakkuk 3, Amos 5:8-9
Writings	1 Chronicles 16:7-36, 2 Chronicles 5:13-14, 7:3, 20:21, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel 2:19-23, 4:34-37.

Reading a psalm in a narrative or in prophecy may help us to see the sort of literature that psalms are more generally.

Take a look at the “double account” of the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14 and 15.

Exodus 14 tells the story in narrative form, Exodus 15 as a psalm. Both tell us what happened to the Egyptians at the Red Sea, but the way they tell us is different.

What similarities and differences do you see between Exodus 14 and 15?

How would you describe the “tone of voice” of each chapter?

There is a real difference between the narrative voice in ch. 14 and the voice of celebration in ch. 15.

The psalm’s voice of celebration presents the story in language which highlights some aspects of the story and plays down others. Exodus 15 takes a different perspective in what it tells us about the “story”. It would be very difficult to piece together the whole story from a psalm alone. When we read a psalm, normally, we cannot construct the story behind the psalm ...

Some of the psalms in the book of Psalms, have a short introduction which refers to a story for them. Sometimes there is a good fit between the story and the psalm, sometimes not. It isn't always clear whether the story suggested

- is connected with when the psalm was written,
- or the story the psalmist had in mind when he wrote it,
- or the appropriate psalm to use when that story is read,
- or the sort of psalm that is appropriate when you find yourself in a similar situation

So the relationship between story and psalm is rarely straightforward. The tone of voice, the selectivity and the often general wording makes a definite historical situation difficult to fix, or even a definite story. In other words, many if not most psalms have been loosened from any historical or narrative context. The psalms work in a different way – they allow the user to bring their own story and their own circumstances and to find a connection or a resonance with the text – often at an emotional level.

Back to Exodus 14 and 15. Both passages interpret the events theologically ... so, how would you describe the *theology* of each chapter?

Do they present the same theology or do they have different emphases?

The fact that the story embeds a psalm also suggests that psalms (praise and lament) find their place in individual and communal experiences, and that outpourings of praise, petition and sorrow are properly addressed to God – and so are outpourings of concern, anger, frustration and questioning.

This also connects us with the Canaanite background of some of the psalms. The psalms often address or, better, express common human responses to events and experiences. The psalms take human experience and direct them to the God who made, knows and loves humanity and who in Jesus Christ has entered our world and its suffering.

Having borrowed ideas and images from another culture, reformed and transformed them, the psalms suggest that there is something to be worked with in all sorts of human responses to life.

But the structure of the book (and of books within the book) also suggest a direction of travel in those responses, towards the acknowledgement of God in praise and doxology. And in that sense, the psalms are missional, creating a connection between experience, the cry of the heart and the wonder of God.

As Athanasius wrote, "... the marvel with the Psalter is that ... the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own, and each one sings the Psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person's feelings being

described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering the words to God as his own heart's utterance, just as though he himself had made them up."

Athanasius, *To Marcellinus On The Interpretation Of The Psalms*

<http://www.athanasius.com/psalms/aletterm.htm>

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