THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE PSALMS

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Introduction

- The Psalms are a collection of 150 individual compositions.

- The diversity within these poems reflect the multifaceted nature of the human experience.

- At the Passover meal (called ***Seder***), they sang a hymn (Matthew 26:30), that was called ***a paschal praise*** from Psalm 136, entitled "the great Hallel."

- This study would be incomplete unless a student understands how the themes, structure, types, genre, and the authorship of the psalms contribute to proper interpretation of them.

Authorship

- The author of each psalm is the human author through whom the Holy Spirit worked to write Scripture **(2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21).** Thus, the ultimate author of this book of the Bible is the Holy Spirit **(Acts 1:20, 13:33, 13:35).**

- Individual psalms come from diverse periods of Israel's history, but at every stage they served as the songbook of God's people.

- David is writing prophetically by the Holy Spirit, especially in psalms that are clearly Messianic.

Five Major Themes of the Psalms

1. Monotheism

2. Creation and Fall

3. Election and Covenant

4. Covenant Membership

5. Eschatology

Types of Psalms

- **Laments,** which lay a troubled situation before the Lord, asking him for help.
- **Hymns of praise**, which call God's people to admire His great attributes and deeds.
- **Hymns of thanksgiving**. As with laments, there are thanksgiving psalms.
- **Hymns celebrating God's law**
- **Wisdom psalms** reflect themes from the Wisdom Books.
- **Songs of confidence**, enable worshipers to deepen their trust in God amid difficulties.
- **Royal psalms**, present the Davidic monarchy as the vehicle of blessing for God's people.
- **Messianic psalms,** all of them relate to the Messiah, the ultimate heir of David.
- **Historical psalms**, lessons from the history of God's dealings with His people.
- **Prophetic hymns**, echo the Prophets calling people to covenant faithfulness.

Structure of the Psalms

- The primary or standard Hebrew text divides the Psalms into *"five books,"* coinciding with the *Pentateuch* (the first five books of the Torah attributed to the author Moses).
- But how did structure of the five books actually start and was there a divine purpose to this division? The Talmud records that God ordered Ezra, the scholar and priest, who wrote in the Old Testament, saying "Collect and compile the Psalms of the Spirit."

These five books are as follows:

Book 1> Psalms 1-41

Psalm 1-2 will provide an introduction to the Psalms as a whole.

Book 2> Psalms 42-72

Book 2 introduces the group of Psalms written by the "sons of Korah" and mixes in some of the historical psalms written by David.

Book 3> Psalms 73-89

The tone of the Psalms darken with the beginning of the third book in Psalm 73. This book contains most of the "sons of Korah" psalms, as well as the songs written by Asaph.

Book 4> Psalms 90-106

Psalm 90 (by Moses) changes the mood into hope as the great leader's prayer has been preserved to remind the worshipper that God is still active on Israel's behalf.

Book 5> Psalm 107-150

This large body of psalms declare that God answers prayers and hears the songs of hope by His people. These are our joyous psalms.

The Genre of the Psalms

These genre help us to identify their content and applicable purpose so we may apply them correctly. These are eight genre of the psalms in sequential order and you are give you at least one example to make it easier to understand and follow along:

1. **Hymns- Ex. Psalm 44**

   There are many songs that were written for the purpose of a solo, congregational worship, or for a choir. The example given in Psalm 44 was a song by the "sons of Korah" and is called a ***Maschil***.

2. **Wisdom- Ex. Psalm 50**

   Unlike a Hymn, a Wisdom psalm is usually prayed or sung by a ***Cantor*** (Hebrew- Hazzan or Chazzan). It is a solo song or prayer usually done publicly in worship).

3. **Confidence (Assurance)- Ex. 58**

   Since Psalm 55 uses the term ***Michtam***, most scholars view this genre of psalms as a "precious writing" to identifying that it is a song of high value.

4. **Lament- Ex. 67-68**

   This is literally one of the saddest songs and carries with it the sound of sorrow. Usually, it was played on a ***Neginoth*** (stringed instrument) for times of great mourning.

5. **Thanksgiving- Ex. 99**

   Often songs of Thanksgiving are short and easily learned by the people. There are many of these genre of psalms in Book 5.

6. **Remembrance- Ex. 106**

   Remembrance psalms are very unique, and Psalm 106 is very typical of this genre. In the New Testament, we also have two examples of this kind of genre in the prayers of Mary (the mother of Jesus) in Luke 1:46-55 and by the priest Simeon in Luke 2:28-35.

7. **Exaltation of Royalty- Ex. 118**

   As we explore this type or genre of a psalm, we must remember that it is primarily a Royal Psalm; in being such, it is almost always Christological and parenthetically points prophetically to the Messiah, Jesus Christ (***Malkuti)***.

8. **Instructional- Ex. 119**

   This is a rare genre that is not always singled out by all scholars today, but the Hebrews certainly recognized its purpose and used it especially beside music with their children. Referred to as the **Shavuot**, it was the highest honor for adolescents (like Ps. 119).

The Two Divergent Views to the Christological Psalms

- There has always been debate concerning which psalms are Messianic or Christological. Much of this controversy is because of the difference in the approach to the psalms by the two major theologians of the reformation (Martin Luther and John Calvin).

- ***FIVE DISCERNING QUESTIONS*** that help us identify a Messianic Psalm:

1. What is it that makes a psalm Messianic?
2. Are there certain concepts that set some psalms apart as Messianic?
3. Must a Messianic psalm have a predictive element in it that the New Testament recognizes as a reference to Jesus Christ?
4. What relevance do Messianic psalms have to their own historical context?
5. Some Messianic psalms speak directly of Christ (like Pss. 2, 16, 22, 110), but does that mean that other psalms do not have a correlation (connection) to Christ?

Beginning with Psalm 1, Martin Luther and John Calvin did not agree on which psalms were Messianic; therefore, we should examine the two theologies and their method of hermeneutics.

Luther's approach to the Psalms

- Luther could not accept any philosophy that placed man's logic as equal to faith in Christ Jesus. Luther argued that the whole Bible is about Jesus Christ and He is therefore the true spiritual sense of Scripture. If the whole Bible is about Christ (as Jesus said seems to say in **Luke 24:44**), Luther concluded that all psalms may not directly refer to the Messiah, but indirectly the content embodies the truth of the life, work, nature of Christ.

Calvin's approach was more Pragmatic

- Calvin was very reluctant to applying a Christological meaning to most of the psalms. He was no doubt highly influenced by the *natural theology* of Thomas Aquinas. Calvin's insistence on "only a human author" and its historical situation, greatly limited his interpretation of any psalm as being Messianic. There are some serious misinterpretations by Calvin. By his own admission, ***Psalm 110*** and ***Psalm 47*** were only a reference to David and his kingdom. But an honest reading of Psalm 47:2-8, demonstrates that only the Messiah (Christ) could fulfill such a glorious role of a King who is God Himself.

The Christological Approach to the Messiah in the Psalms

- The Christological approach examined here has much in common with the historical-grammatical approach. It sees the importance of the historical context, the grammar of the Old Testament, the literary characteristics of the text, and then interprets it in light of what the psalm teaches us about God (theology).

- Christ should be preached only from the psalms that are directly related to the Royal Psalms, or from psalms directly or indirectly connected to David or the kingdom of God. While there are psalms that have double-meaning, the caution is not to try to stretch every psalm into an indirect prophecy to the Messiah. Having understood this warning, a psalm can be considered Messianic if it deals with the person of the king. The Christological view of the Messiah [Jesus Christ] applies to any additional aspects involved in **1)** the right of the king, **2)** the promises of salvation, **3)** the work that must be done to carry out those promises, **4)** the person required in addition to the king, **5)** the realm over which the Messiah reigns, and **6)** the results of his (His) reign.

Indirect Messianic Psalms

- These kinds of psalms are hard to interpret as always being Messianic Psalms because they seem to be individual or congregational *laments*. On the other hand, ***three issues surface*** in examining them that may be applicable to the God-man Jesus Christ. **1)** Who is the one speaking, **2)** What is the situation behind the lament in the psalm, **3)** Who are the enemies that oppress the person or group?

- Psalms 26, 51, 73, 79, 88, 109, and 137 are all songs or prayers that could easily depict the suffering Messiah and the subsequent praise given in the context. Theologians like Martin Luther and Robert Bellarmine attribute to the Messiah the following psalms of 18, 30, 32, 34, 92, 107, 116, 118, and 138. They are typical of these thanksgiving genre and are often debated as to whether or not they are Indirect Messianic Psalms.

- Between the two psalms of 106 (that closes the 4th book) and psalm 107 (that opens the 5th book), most scholars see them as a remembrance and thanksgiving that recognizes God's Covenant Faithfulness that could only be fulfilled by the Messiah.

Royal Messianic Psalms

- The theological foundation for the dynasty of David is established in the promises of God to David in the Davidic covenant (**2 Samuel 7**). There is little wonder that ideas associated with the king and his reign have such prominent place in the Psalms. At the heart of the theology of the psalms is the idea of kingship, concerning both the human king and God as king. Some scholars argue that the organizing metaphor for the theology of the psalms is the concept **'the Lord reigns.'**

- While there is clearly and certainly a relationship between the historical king and the Messianic king, we can never separate a *Royal Psalm* from its intention of prophesying and revealing to us the God-King Jesus Christ. The law regulating how a king should conduct himself (**Deuteronomy 17:14-20**) cannot be set aside in a Messianic Psalm.

- **The *Royal Psalms*** are generally seen as: Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144. The key promises of the Davidic covenant include a descendant (seed) of David who will build the Lord's house, a father-son relationship between the Lord and the descendant, an enduring house or dynasty, and an enduring kingdom (**2 Samuel 7:12-16**). You must ask yourself, did David fulfill all those promises and expectations? What is most remarkable about the *Royal Psalm* is how close the relationship is between the king and God. What is said about God is affirmed about the king. This puts a heavy standard on David or any other Judean king to fulfill. Without question, Christ fits such a King.

Direct Messianic Psalms

- These type of Psalms have traditionally been held by Conservative, Fundamental, and Pentecostal theologians as ***Direct Messianic Psalms***. They speak directly of the Messiah and His work, and they are used in the New Testament that confirms their Christological theme. There are fourteen clearly indicated as Direct Messianic Psalms: 2, 8, 16, 22, 40, 45, 68, 69, 72, 89, 109, 110, 118, and 132.

- *Direct Messianic Psalms* almost always correlate to a New Testament reference.

STUDENT EXERCISES IN CHRISTOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Now, you are about to put into practice the skills you have learned about doing analysis in *the Christology of Psalms*. Remember, you must attempt to choose one of each type of psalm with your group (3-4) people, so you can learn to identify Messianic Psalms and use them in your preaching or teaching in an appropriate interpretive manner

CONCLUSION

- The Christological approach considers the full contextualization of the psalms in their **1)** historical or literary setting, **2)** the unfolding of revelation through redemptive history, **3)** the unity of the purposes of God for His people, and **4)** the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. This approach believes both the human author and divine author are important for this biblical approach.

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