

Interpreting Old Testament Poetry

Initial Thoughts

Prayers

- Complaint-most common genre in the Psalms
 - YHWH deliver us from this crisis that we cannot fix!
 - Psalm 22
 - Invoking God's name (1-2)
 - Affirmation of faith and confidence (3-5)
 - General complaint (6-8ff)
 - Petition (19-21)
 - Hymn of thanksgiving (22-26ff)
 - Many will also include a confession of sin or assert their innocence in the midst of the crisis. (Ps 7:3-5; Ps 51:3-5)
 - Royal complaint-either the king is speaking or is being spoken of (Ps 89; 144)
 - Imprecatory Psalm-the psalmists wants God to know (God wants us to know) how strongly he feels about the matter (Ps 59:12b-13)
 - Dirge-funeral lament (Lamentations 1-2, 4) mourning the loss of a city and its population
 - Expressions of mourning, sometimes wailing
 - Description of some calamity or disaster
 - Call for others to weep
 - The practice of grief...
 - A Lament (Psalm 3)
 - Address 1
 - Complaint 1-2
 - Trust 3-6
 - Deliverance 7a
 - Assurance 7
 - Praise 8
- Songs
 - Thanksgiving Song-associated with complaint as the people are making good on their promise to praise YHWH for his deliverance

- Speakers usually direct their words both to the Lord and to those people participating in the ceremony
 - Psalm 30
 - Praise the Lord for his help (1, 12b)
 - Invitation for others to join in praising and thanking the Lord (4-5)
 - The report of what the Lord has done to receive this praise (2-3, 6-12a)
 - Psalm 138
 - Introduction 1-2
 - Distress 3
 - Appeal 3
 - Deliverance 6-7
 - Testimony 4-5, 8
- Royal thanksgiving song (Ps 18; 21)
- Hymn-closely resembles a thanksgiving song. It is a song that praises YHWH.
 - Psalm 96
 - Called to praise, addressed to other worshippers and probably sung by a song leader or choir (1-3, 7-13)
 - The actual praise offered to YHWH (4-6)
 - Personal hymn (Ps 8; 77; 103-104)
 - Coronation hymns (Ps 2; 10, 24, 29, 47) Sung or read during ceremonies as a new king came to power
 - Zion hymn (Ps 46; 48; 76; 84; etc) Mount Zion is the residence of YHWH...Jerusalem is a royal city
- Love Songs
 - Royal Wedding Song (Ps 45)
 - King (2)
 - Bride (10-12)
 - Knowing this genre helps us to better understand references to the ceremony's participants and proceedings (9, 14, 15)
 - The Song of Songs (Solomon)
- Liturgies-community worship in the temple (two or more speakers participate in response to one another)
 - Thanksgiving liturgy (Ps 118)
 - Call to praise (priests) 1-2
 - Response (congregation) 2
 - Call (priests) 3
 - Response (congregation) 3

- Testimony (king) 5, 10 etc
 - Petition/thanks (congregation) 25-26
 - Thanksgiving (king) 28
 - Call to praise (priests) 29
- Entrance liturgy-ready to be admitted into the sanctuary (Ps 15; 24) also texts such as Isa 33:14-16; Mic 6:6-8
 - Question (worshippers) Ps 24:3
 - Torah response (priest) Ps 24: 4-6
- Prophetic liturgy-combines congregational procession and praise with a word from a prophet (Ps 95) Following is probable-
 - 1-7a (Priest calls congregation into temple to give YHWH praise)
 - 7b-11 (YHWH addresses a stern warning to the worshippers through a prophet who would have served on the temple staff)
 - Also see the sermon of Ps 50:7-23
- Wisdom Psalms
 - Psalm 1, 19, 33, 37, 39*, 49, 73, 112, 127

Principles of Interpretation for Old Testament Poetry

- Poetry especially seen in the Psalms serve as a guide to worship, provide an example of how we can relate honestly to God, and demonstrate the importance of reflection and meditation upon the things that God has done for his glory and our benefit.
- Poems originated as complete units, so we should interpret them in their entirety rather than as isolated verses
- For the purposes of interpretation, it is best that we usually view each psalm as its own literary context. It is good to use psalms of the same literary genre to interpret each other since they share common literary form, setting and purpose. We may certainly look for historical context...more on that in a moment.
- The occasion on which ancient Israel used a psalm constitutes its historical context. (Told you there would be more) We will better understand and apply a text when a liturgy, wedding song, or funeral dirge is interpreted as if it was used at a worship, wedding, or funeral service. If a poem implies that several speakers are present (I, you, we) our interpretation must incorporate that fact along with its underlying setting.
- Consider unique features. If a psalm is spoken by the larger community rather than just and individual, then we should interpret them corporately first before thinking individualistically. We might also consider the unique feature of hyperbole in love songs here-language exaggerated for effect rather than literal interpretation.

- Take into account structure and development of thought. (see examples above) How do main points of each major section of a psalm contribute to the whole message of the entire psalm?
- Application must conform to the situation behind each genre. Corporate texts=Christian community; Individual texts=individual Christian. Initially, we should resist the temptation to extract devotional content in violation of the text's original context.
- Contemporary application should coincide with the poem's original purpose, occasion and speakers. Think of both the blessing and creativity that this might bring.

Orientation-Disorientation-Reorientation

Assignment: Psalm 27; Psalm 46; Psalm 51