PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING PSALMS
(and other poetry…i.e., Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon)

I. Introduction to the Psalms

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. “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?” (Fee and Stuart) 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 ___________ _________.

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). In contrast, each psalm must read as a literary unit and each of the individual parts must be read in light of how they contribute to the whole, and specifically to the central idea or unifying theme of the psalm.

B. Interpret each psalm in light of its _______________ __________________.

“The specific circumstances in the life of the individual or of the people that produced the psalm, or the situation for which the psalm was written, provide helpful insight into the meaning of the psalm. To discover such a historical context, study the form (or structure) and contents of the psalm” itself (Kenneth Barker). 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 ____________ ____________.

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

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. Recognizing the main features of these different categories of psalm will not only help “the interpretation of individual texts, it will also provide a convenient way…to cover most of the psalms without studying each of them individually” (Longman).

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: “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” (Wendland). Determining which genre a given psalm belongs to—and recognizing the primary features of that genre—will lead the interpreter to discern that specific purpose.

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 lamentor, the lamentor 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 lamentor to prayer” (Longman). Even though the overall mood of the lament is one of melancholy and despair, “there are one or two moments when the lamentor makes clear his basic trust in God” (Longman). Furthermore, as the lamentor 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**

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**
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**

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 ______________.**

Because the psalms consist of poetry, they are distinct from other genres of literature and must be interpreted in light of their poetic nature. As Fee and Stuart observe, “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**

   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**

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. In other words, the second line builds upon the first line, “completing or reinforcing the thought begun there” (Wendland). If the second line provides no further clarification of the first, the parallelism should be classified as synonymous, but if it does bring forth clarification or expansion, it is synthetic.

- **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**

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**

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**

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**

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 (also see Lesson 13: “The Use of Symbolic Language” below). 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 You, 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”
   - 64:7: “Cause Your face to shine upon us”

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”

**Guidelines for Exegeting Psalms (William Barrick):**

1. Identify the limits of the periscope (or, or the full psalm).
2. Identify the basic genre (lament, praise, wisdom). [see Encountering the Book of Psalms for help in this arena]
3. Identify the structure of the psalm, taking into account clues derived from comparative analysis of the genre.
4. Observe the use of tricola, “Selah,” refrains, inclusios, and change of persons with regard to the internal division of the psalm.
5. Study the super- and subscripts when they occur.
6. Arrange the English text in poetic lines, highlighting parallelism, repetitions, inclusios, and other literary cues.
7. Diagram the Hebrew text.
8. Revise your English text arrangement in accord with the results of the Hebrew diagram.
9. Develop an exegetical outline. [see Zemek’s *Roadmaps for the Psalms* for helps]
10. Identify the exegetical significance of each poetic device employed by the psalmist.
11. Research the geographical, historical, and cultural setting and contents of the psalm as much as possible. [see Merrill’s *Kingdom of Priests* or Kaiser’s *History of Israel*]
12. Examine the canonical (placement within the five books of Psalms) and theological implications of the psalm.
13. Study the NT usage of any portions of the psalm. Identify the purpose for quoting the psalm and any apparent change in contexts.
14. Identify the applicational implications of the psalm.

**Concluding doxological benefits of the Psalms:**
1. Psalms can serve as a guide to worship. We can use them as a formal means of expression of our thoughts and feelings to God. They are so varied, at least one of them is bound to touch upon the topic/theme which we desire to express to the Lord, furnishing the right and varied words. (see Donald Whitney’s discussion on the significance of praying the Psalms.

2. Psalms demonstrate to us how we can relate honestly to God. Whether we are in need of expressing joy, disappointment, anger, or other emotions. They provide an example of godly articulation of our strongest emotions and desires.

3. Psalms demonstrate the importance of reflection and meditation on things that God has done for us. The Psalms, like no other literature, lift us to a position where we can commune with God, capturing a sense of the greatness of His person and His kingdom. They invite us to prayer and controlled contemplation of His Word to flood our thinking.

4. Psalms furnish rich truths to sing back to God.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY:

- See “Resources for Biblical Expositors” at www.biblicalexpositor for recommended Psalms commentaries.
- “The Psalms: Israel’s Prayers and Ours” in Fee/Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, 202-23.
For Homework:
Based on the discussion of parallelism, classify each of the couplets (verses) in Psalm 20. Note that verse 5 and 6 each have three lines instead of two. Either classify all three lines together as one category, or classify the first two as one category and then relate the last line to the first two as a category.