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CATEGORIZING THE PSALMS ACCORDING TO GENRE

The book of Psalms is the most read, the most used of all the Old Testament books. In the Psalms, ancient worshipers address God; for centuries people of faith have learned from these texts how to pray. The Psalms express every emotion – from joy to despair, from hate to love. “This explains, moreover, why the Psalter is the favorite book of all the saints, and why each one of them, whatever his circumstances may be, finds in it psalms and words which are appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself and meet his needs as adequately as if they were composed exclusively for his sake” [1, 20].

The Book of Psalms is a collection, or, to be more exact, several collections, of religious songs. The English word “Psalms” is a transliteration of the Greek term *psalmoi*, which is the title of the book in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The English word “Psalter” is a loanword from the Greek, just as “psalms” is.

The Hebrew title of this collection of God-centered poems is “The Book of Praises,” or simply “Praises”, a term which is also used to refer to a single “song of praise” like Psalm 145. This word is a fitting title because it calls attention to one of the main purposes of the book as a whole: all of the psalms in one way or another praise or proclaim the glory and majesty of God [2, 17].

The earliest Hebrew manuscripts did not number the psalms in sequence. The convention of numbering was established later, and the total became fixed in the canon at 150. 116 of the 150 psalms have superscriptions, brief titles written just above the text. Scholars agree that superscriptions are not original to the text but were added in the process of compiling the Psalter. Reasons for this judgment include:

- 1) the lack of agreement between the superscriptions in the Hebrew, Greek and Syrian versions of the Old Testament;
- 2) analogy to other biblical texts, especially in Chronicles;
- 3) difficulties in correlating content in a given superscription with that in the body of the corresponding psalm [3, 4, 5].

Nonetheless, the superscriptions are a part of the book of Psalms and may hint about how ancient Israel interpreted these texts. The superscriptions vary but often contain three elements [6, 9]:

1. *Liturgical collections.* Many of the superscriptions contain a phrase such as “Psalm of David”, “Psalm of Asaph”, “Psalm of the Sons of Korah”, indicating the liturgical collection from which the psalm came.

2. *Technical terms related to use in worship.* Psalm 59 is a Miktam (golden poem) of David, and its superscription includes instructions to the choirmaster.

3. *Historical notes.* Several psalm superscriptions include a setting for the psalm. The superscription of Psalm 59 says, "A Miktam of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him". These historical notes help the reader envision the psalm's impact in a particular setting in a representative person's life. These historical notes provide clues to the way the compilers of the Psalter understood certain psalms to function in life.

There is a clear subdivision of the Psalter into five distinct sections. These sections are called "books". The basis for this structure is the special word of praise to God which concludes each of the five parts. In the first four books, this "doxology" consists of just a verse or two. But at the end of the fifth and final division, an entire psalm (150 – the "Great Hallelujah Hymn") performs this concluding function.

The Psalter as a whole is not just a random, haphazard arrangement of unconnected items. Important psalms are placed at key positions within the structural arrangement of the complete book. The occurrence of a teaching psalm at the beginning of the Psalter is significant. It serves as the Psalter's motto or preface, indicating the importance of the Lord's "instruction" as the foundation for all proper worship and praise of him.

It is important to recognize that the psalms are not all the same. There are certain variations in the style in which they are written (form), in what they say (content), and also in the purpose or occasion for which they were written (function). (Note, however, that these categories are not based on the Hebrew titles found at the beginning of most psalms.) The psalms will be classified according to their literary genre, e.g., songs of praise, songs of petition, songs of thanksgiving, and so forth. Under the term *genre* we understand "class" or "type". It refers to a group of oral or written texts that are similar to one another in some recognizable ways, whether with respect to form, content, function or usage. This is important because the way we interpret a given literary text is guided to a great extent by our identification of its genre. The method of classification is based to some extent upon a given psalm's style and structure, but even more upon its textual content and purpose. The categories are not always clear-cut, however. A psalm may be viewed as belonging to more than one category, depending on how one analyzes it. Within a single composition both petition and praise are often combined, and so one cannot really say that the psalm is one or the other.

As to the different purposes for which the psalms were written, we can see that there are three main ones for which people speak to God (addressing him in the second person as "you" [2, 31] :

1. to convey petition (an individual or some believers ask God for help in a time of need);
2. thanksgiving (believers gratefully respond to something specific that the Lord in his mercy has already done);

3. praise (they worship and glorify God for his greatness and goodness).

Certain other psalms are used to speak not to God, but about God, that is, in the third person. They may be divided into psalms that teach people wisdom and psalms of trust, in which believers profess their faith in God – who he is and what he may be expected to do for them.

There are five *major functions*: petition, thanksgiving, praise, instruction and profession of trust. In addition, there are another five *minor functions* which are also important. They are called “minor” because a passage with such a function occurs as part of a psalm that is classified first as having one of the major functions. The *five minor* functions are repentance, remembrance, retribution, royalty, and liturgy [2, 32]. Usually these particular communicative intentions are expressed only by a few verses within a psalm.

The largest number of psalms in the Psalter belongs to the category of **petition**. Petition includes all kinds of prayer to God for help in time of distress or difficulty. The psalmist may ask God to protect him from danger, to deliver him from his enemies, or to assist him at a time of serious sickness, physical or spiritual. There are two main types of petition psalm:

1. *Individual prayers*. These are psalms in which the speaker is appealing for help for himself. They are the most common.
2. *Communal prayers*. These are psalms in which the entire congregation of believers asks God to help the group as a whole.

Intense emotion is often manifested in psalms of petition: despair, anger, sorrow, frustration. There are also many expressions of hope and confidence in the Lord’s response. In individual petitions the first person singular pronoun “I, me, my” abounds; in the communal type “we, us, our” is prominent. In these psalms “you” refers to God and “they” to the psalmist’s enemies.

A typical petition contains most of the following seven functional constituents, but not necessarily in the same order: (a) appeal; (b) problem; (c) request; (d) defense or confession; (e) profession of trust; (f) promise; (g) praise.

The following is an outline of the individual petition of Psalm 54 according to the seven stages:

<i>Save me, O God, by your name;</i>	APPEAL	(a)
<i>Vindicate me by your might.</i>		
<i>Hear my prayer, O God;</i>		
<i>Listen to the words of my mouth.</i>		
<i>Strangers are attacking me;</i>	PROBLEM	(b)
<i>ruthless men seek my life –</i>		
<i>men without regard for God. Selah.</i>		
<i>Surely God is my help;</i>	PROFESSION	(e)
<i>The LORD is the one who sustains me.</i>		

<i>Let evil recoil on those who slander me; In your faithfulness destroy them.</i>	REQUEST	(c)
<i>I will sacrifice a freewill offering to you; I will praise your name, O LORD, for it is good.</i>	PROMISE	(f)
<i>For he has delivered me from all my troubles, And my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes.</i>	PRAISE	(g)

In Psalm 54 only element (d) (defense) is missing; however, it is implied in the “request”, because if someone is slandered, he or she must be innocent of any alleged wrongdoing.

A characteristic and somewhat surprising feature of the individual petition is in the shift of the overall tone of the psalm from sadness to gladness, from despair to hope. A similar progression is manifested in the book of Psalms as a whole: petitions are concentrated in the first half, while praises predominate in the second half of the Psalter.

Just as a psalm of petition can be either an individual or a communal prayer, so also a psalm of **thanksgiving** may be either personal or corporate, with the psalmist thanking God either for his gracious helps to him as an individual or for what he has done for his chosen people. But there are some key differences between a song of petition and a song of thanksgiving. While a note of praise is usually included in most of the psalms of petition, this function is the primary compositional element of a psalm of thanksgiving (and a psalm of praise as well). In other words, one major difference between a petition psalm and a thanksgiving psalm is the relative amount of praise that is present. Words ascribing glory to God occur both at the beginning and the end of the thanksgiving, whereas they are found only at the end of a typical petition. So, thanksgiving psalms tend to be more optimistic in outlook and happy in emotive tone.

Another key difference between the petition and the song of thanksgiving involves the time perspective. The thanksgiving commemorates something specific that God has already done to help the psalmist himself or the people as a whole. The time orientation is past, looking back at the time of distress and deliverance rather than present, as in the petition for salvation right now. In the song of thanksgiving, the crisis is over, the problem has been resolved. In the prayer of petition, the singer may make a vow to praise God; in the thanksgiving psalm he fulfills that vow.

Psalms of **praise**, also called “hymns,” are more or less completely devoted to praising the Lord for his greatness and majesty and for his constant grace and mercy to his people. A hymn is usually more general in its content than a song of thanksgiving. It does not refer to some specific situation in the past. In most, if not all hymn contexts, God is regarded and praised as the great King who rules over all things, especially as protector of the kingdom of

his holy ones. Key words in praise psalms are “praise”, “give thanks”, “glory”, “bless”, “sing (happily)” and “rejoice.” A familiar Hebrew expression that often marks the pure hymn is the joyful command *halleluyah* meaning “praise Yahweh”.

A hymn of praise usually contains only three parts, and they are closely related:

- a) It always begins with *summons* to praise the Lord;
- b) The main part of the psalm speaks of the *reasons* why people should praise him. The most frequently mentioned ones are God’s acts of creation and preservation of his people.
- c) It ends with a *concluding call* to thank and praise the Lord, often with increased emphasis, that is, with more enthusiasm and joy than at the beginning.

A good example of a praise hymn is Psalm 100: PRAISE
Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

*Worship the Lord with gladness;
 Come before him with joyful songs.*

Know that the Lord is God. REASON

*It is he who made us, and we are his;
 We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

Enter his gates with thanksgiving PRAISE

*And his courts with praise;
 Give thanks to him and praise his name.*

For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; REASON

His faithfulness continues through all generations.

There are many reasons for praising God. One is to acknowledge his wonderful creation and powerful manifestation in nature. Some psalms may be considered a separate category or subgenre. In other psalms many more of the “mighty works” of the Lord are mentioned.

The main purpose of the instructional songs is to teach the faithful how they might lead a life that is pleasing their King (Ps. 78:1-8). In contrast to the strong emotions, positive and negative, that are expressed in the psalms of petition and praise, the psalms of **instruction** are typically more restrained, meditative and devotional in style. Didactic psalms have more to do with life in general and how the believer ought to follow the will of Yahweh and flee what is evil or contrary to his commands. These instructional prayers are frequently called *wisdom* psalms. They teach what “true wisdom” is from God’s point of view. They emphasize what constitutes prudent God-pleasing behavior and include strong admonitions to avoid the destructive ways of the wicked. The word “blessed” is frequently used to describe the wise person who lives to please God (Ps. 34:8). Walking in the fear of the Lord is another expression commonly used to describe those who honor and obey God (Ps. 34:9, 11). Several of the teaching prayers sound like the debate in Job

concerning the question of why evil persons often seem to prosper in this life (Ps. 37 and 49). The Lord sees and will finally judge the wicked according to their works (Ps. 34:15-16, 21; 37:28-38). In addition to strong contrast, other stylistic features are comparative sayings (Ps. 37:16), warnings (Ps. 32:9), similes (Ps. 128:3), rhetorical questions (Ps. 25:12) and direct speech of the wicked (Ps. 73:11).

The pairs of parallel lines in these psalms are often stated in the form of “general truths” and comparisons which apply to the lives of people who seek to follow the teachings of the Lord in contrast to those who live contrary to the divinely way. A typical contrastive pair can be seen in Psalms 112:1, 10:

*Blessed is the man who fears the Lord,
who finds great delight in his commands...*

*The wicked man will see and be vexed,
he will gnash his teeth and waste away;
the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.*

In the psalms of **trust**, the psalmist expresses his complete reliance upon the Lord as the savior and protector of his life. It is not always easy to distinguish these psalms as a separate category. Most of them could easily be classified as a petition, a song of thanksgiving, or even a teaching psalm. In each of these psalms of profession the main emphasis is on the speaker’s unshakable confidence in the Lord.

These are sometimes called “creedal” psalms because there is a special focus upon testimony to the faithfulness of the Lord to his covenant with his people. The psalmist doesn’t ask for deliverance from his enemies, nor does he thank God for having already saved him. He expresses his faith that the Lord continually saves him. As in psalms of instruction, the temporal focus is neither on past time nor the future, but it is timeless. Normally God is referred to in the third person except when he is being quoted, as in Psalm 46:10-11:

*“Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations...”*

*The Lord Almighty is with us;
The God of Jacob is our fortress.*

The reason the psalmist fears nothing and no one is that he firmly believes God is ever present to protect and deliver him. Psalm 23 is the most familiar of the psalms of trust and it is a good illustration of the difference between this group and those of a didactic nature, such as Psalm 1.

The psalms of **repentance** (sometimes termed “penitential”) may be considered a subtype of the petition psalms, some of which give a special emphasis to the confession of sin. In expressing repentance the psalmist typically speaks of deep sadness over his own sin, guilt and unrighteousness and appeals to God to be merciful and to grant him forgiveness.

There is always some prominent expression of hope in the psalms of repentance. They usually incorporate a number of explicit statements declaring

that the individual, or the group, trusts completely in the Lord to forgive their sins. The psalmist may also mention the work of God's Spirit in his life, moving him to repent of his wickedness so that God might restore him to a right relationship with himself (Ps. 51:11). It is the Spirit of God who creates or inspires a right spirit within the sinner, a heart made right with God which desires to live a holy life in conformity with his will (Ps. 51:12). The psalmist realizes that after God forgives his sin, saves him from his affliction, and heals his body, he is obligated then to live a life pleasing to the Lord. The result of recovery and restoration is often celebrated in words of praise that convey the forgiven sinner's great joy over what God has done for him.

There are seven psalms in the Psalter which have traditionally been designated as "penitential". They clearly express the interrelated ideas of sickness being a result of sin and the confidence that recovery will follow repentance.

The songs of **remembrance**, also known as historical psalms, are a special type of thanksgiving psalm. They speak about the Lord's faithful provision and protection of his chosen people in the past. They often include a strong expression of faith on the part of the psalmist or the worshipping congregation; thus certain portions may also sound like a profession of trust. The two events in the history of Israel that the songs of remembrance mention most often are the Exodus from Egypt, and the promise of an eternal throne, or kingship, through the descendants of David.

The historical psalms also call to bitter remembrance the people's repeated acts of unfaithfulness and disobedience, for which they had to be justly punished by their righteous Lord. Thus these past events of God working in the lives of his people are recorded not as a mere history lesson, but rather as

- 1) examples to warn the present generation not to follow the wicked behavior of those who broke the covenant (Ps. 106:40-43);
- 2) a strong encouragement to keep walking in steadfast obedience to the Lord (Ps. 105:42-45);
- 3) reminders to praise and thank the gracious and glorious King (Ps. 105:1-2).

He who once delivered their ancestors would one day do the same for all those who remain in faithful fellowship with him.

Psalms of **retribution** come under the general category of petitions, but they are a specific kind of petition in which the psalmist requests the Lord not only to deliver him (and/or God's people), but also to *punish* the wicked.

It is important to read these prayers (sometimes misleadingly called *imprecatory*) in their total context. They need to be understood not from our perspective today, but from the point of view of the cultural and religious setting of their own time. A careful study will show that the psalmist is not really asking God to wreak vengeance or punish for his own sake. Rather, it is for the sake of the honor and reputation of God. What the psalmist is praying

for is an act of righteous “retribution” (a just judgment) by which God defends his good name.

In these psalms we usually find an urgent call for the Lord to judge the wicked swiftly and severely. Should the enemy continue to afflict God’s people, the faithful might begin to doubt or even despair of ever receiving help from the Lord. However, the psalmist leaves the entire matter completely in God’s hands, knowing that he will act justly (see Ps. 37:8-9; 92:11, 15).

In these appeals for justice, the psalmists often use very strong speech, e.g. “Do I not hate them that hate thee, O Lord? ... I count them my enemies” (Ps.139:91-92). With such words the faithful are expressing their great hatred of sin and evil more than hatred of the people who were doing wicked things (Ps. 101:8). The language they use emphasizes the outrage they feel over the injustice and oppression. These words are not to be taken literally; they should rather be viewed as hyperbole, deliberate exaggeration, the purpose of which is to make the communication more effective. For example, note the strong words of 68:21, 23; 109:12; and 137:8-9). Their purpose is to impress the hearers so that they too will want to defend the justice and honor of God.

There are four psalms which, for the most part, can be categorized as petitions for retribution, namely, 35, 69, 83, 109. In addition, there are psalms that contain passages of this kind. Examples are seen in Psalms 54, 55, 58, 59, 68, 79, 94, 129, 137, 139 and 140.

The songs of **royalty** - of kingship – that extol God as the glorious King who rules over all nations are, in essence, psalms of praise (see Ps. 47:7-9). Most of the royalty psalms are of this type. Psalms 67, 96, 97, 98 and 99 are examples. Some royalty psalms speak of God as a mighty Warrior who is strong in battle, particularly in defense of Zion (Ps. 98:1).

It needs to be recognized that most of these psalms which speak of God or his Messiah as King belong to the category of songs of praise. They follow the basic threefold structural pattern of a song of praise: a) opening praise, b) reasons for praise, c) concluding praise. Many of the royal songs also express a strong profession of trust in the Lord.

The importance of these psalms is indicated by the fact that they are found in key positions throughout the Psalter, for instance, at the very beginning (Psalm 2) and at the end of Books II (Psalm 72) and III (Psalm 89).

Songs of **liturgy** are the least discrete category, for they can always be classified as one or another of the nine types already considered. Most are songs of praise or thanksgiving although there are also a number of petition-prayers among them.

The main characteristic of a liturgical hymn is its arrangement: certain clauses and parallel lines which are repeated from time to time within the psalm. These reiterated clauses are called “refrains”. These words are words of petition, thanksgiving, praise, instruction, or profession directed to a holy and righteous God who was viewed as being immediately present with them as they were gathered for worship in his name. In addition to helping emphasize

the message, the repeated lines also serve an organizational function, indicating the psalm's major divisions.

There are quite a few psalms scattered throughout the Psalter that stand out as having a recognizable liturgical structure especially suitable for public worship. Among this group are Psalms 15, 24, 42, 43, 47, 49, 50, 56, 57, 59, 75, 81, 115, 118, 121, 124, 136.

The five principal communicative purposes for which the psalms were used by the people of God are petition, thanksgiving, praise, instruction (teaching) and profession of trust. They correspond most closely to the five basic motivations for prayer, that is, *pray* in the day of trouble to the merciful King who rules all things; *thank* the King for delivering you; *praise* the King for who he is and what he does; *teach* others about the King's great wisdom and mighty works; and always *profess your trust* in the King through words and deeds that are in keeping with his royal covenant of grace.

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Резюме

Проблема изучения религиозного дискурса стала чрезвычайно актуальной в современной гуманистике в связи с распадом советской политической системы и переосмыслением её идеологии. В статье проводится анализ псалмов согласно их жанровой репрезентации.