

ANCIENT PSALMS AND MODERN WORSHIP

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Despite disagreement and uncertainty about a number of issues¹ related to the Book of Psalms, scholars generally agree that the psalms were used in Israel's worship. The book is often referred to as "the Hymnbook of the Second Temple."² Since the psalms were used in Israel's public worship, it seems likely that they reflect patterns for worship that can and should be incorporated into congregational worship today.³ Throughout the history

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¹ Debate continues about whether the canonical psalms originated out of the personal experiences of individuals and were later incorporated into Israel's worship or whether they were largely written specifically for use in Israel's worship. Some discussion continues about whether the only significant *Sitz im Leben* for understanding a psalm involves the setting in which it was used in worship or whether the setting out of which the psalm originated is equally useful. Of course in many cases neither setting can be determined with any degree of confidence. While there is general agreement that stereotyped language and stylistic considerations strongly determined the forms of the various types of psalms, the extent to which the creativity of individual authors modified these artistic canons is unclear. Scholars continue to discuss whether psalms should be categorized on the basis of form or content. The extent to which psalms, composed by a single author, were modified by the priestly community to address the needs of subsequent generations is not certain. Also the extent to which the roots of Hebrew psalmody are to be found in oral tradition is unclear as is the role poems such as these played in the lives of individual Israelites apart from public worship. Gerald Wilson has argued that the psalms that introduce each book in the psalter and the seam psalms between each book reflect a specific agenda on the part of the editor who organized the Book of Psalms (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* [Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985]). Also see John Walton, "The Psalms: A Cantata about the Davidic Covenant," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 21-31.

² Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 525. As Gottwald indicates, most scholars today recognize that much of the material in the Book of Psalms is earlier than second temple times. "Psalms thus gives us a compressed sampling of texts from the first and second temple programs of worship" (ibid.).

³ As Peter Craigie points out, "the book of Psalms as a whole contains Israel's songs and prayers which constitute the response of the chosen people to their reve-

of the church, the psalms have been used extensively in personal devotions and meditation, and the relevance of these psalms for both public and personal worship is almost universally acknowledged. Miller says, "It is in the conviction that the psalms belong both at the center of the life and worship of Christian congregations and in the midst of the personal pilgrimage that each of us makes under the shadow of the Almighty, that I have written this book."⁴ Many recent books on worship find numerous examples from the Book of Psalms to support their points.⁵ Despite the widespread agreement about the relevance of various individual psalms for worship today, important dimensions of application are sometimes overlooked.

Several difficulties are encountered in an attempt to transfer the use of psalms in Old Testament worship to worship today. First, few details are given about how psalms were used in Old Testament worship. That they were used is clear from numerous comments in the Bible⁶ as well as from tradition.⁷ "That there was a great number of activities accompanying poetic 'recitations' is clear from allusions in the poems themselves. However, there is not a single complete ritual preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures that would indicate exactly the place and kind of accompaniment of prayer or song."⁸ "Both the descriptions of such cultic processions and the allusions to them in other Old Testament texts and his own imagination [are needed for the interpreter] to recall a picture of the definite situation from which such

lation from God" (*Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1983], 39). As such they stand as appropriate models for believers' responses to God today.

⁴ Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), vii.

⁵ An example is Ronald B. Allen and Gordon Borrer, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982).

⁶ The title to Psalm 92 reads, "A song for the Sabbath"; the superscription of Psalm 100 suggests it was used in connection with the thanksgiving offering (cf. Jer. 33:11). Numerous references throughout the psalms indicate their connection with temple worship (e.g., Pss. 5:7; 63:2-5; 66:13-17). In addition several passages outside the Book of Psalms (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:4-36; Amos 5:23 [speaking of worship at Bethel]) describe worship that used psalms. Nehemiah 9 describes a worship assembly in which a salvation-history hymn was sung.

⁷ According to the Psalm scroll found at Qumran, David composed 364 songs to be sung at the altar with the daily sacrifices, 52 songs to accompany the Sabbath offerings throughout the year, and an additional 30 songs for the new moon festivals and other festivals (J. A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967], 134).

⁸ Erhard Gerstenberger, "The Lyrical Literature," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985), 426.

a psalm cannot be separated,"⁹ A second difficulty in transferring worship patterns from Old Testament psalms to worship today is created by cultural differences between present-day settings and ancient Israel. Despite such difficulties it is possible to make some general suggestions about worship on the basis of material in the psalms and to identify certain specific patterns in the biblical psalms that can be applied today.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDITATION IN WORSHIP

Rylaarsdam has argued that proclamation was a fundamental element in Israel's worship, and he sees Deuteronomy 6:6-9 as the model for that proclamation.¹⁰ "These words ... shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." The same emphasis on constant attention to God's instruction and reflection on His works is found regularly in the Book of Psalms.

Psalm 1:3 describes a person who "prosper" or succeeds in what he or she does. The secret of that success results from delighting in the instruction of the Lord and meditating on that instruction (1:2). Meditation is a central theme in the worship reflected in the psalms. The importance of the idea is not seen so much in the occurrence of the Hebrew word *הִגָּה* ("to meditate"), for the word is not used frequently. Rather, the word is but one of a number of general synonyms used in the book. In Psalm 1 *הִגָּה* is used in parallel with *הִפְיֵץ* ("to delight") and the two terms refer to similar though not identical activities. In Psalm 77:12 *הִגָּה* is used in parallel with the words *זָכַר* ("to remember," v. 11) and *שָׁיַח* ("to muse," v. 12), while a few verses earlier a similar idea is expressed in verses 5-6 with *הִשָּׁב* ("to consider"), *זָכַר* ("to remember") *שָׁיַח* ("to muse"), and *הִפְשֵׁחַ* ("to search out" or "ponder"). To this list could be added the frequently encountered ideas of reflecting on and studying the works of God (e.g., Pss. 111:2; 143:5). The form of the psalms and their use in worship almost certainly encouraged the focus and meditation on God's truth and deeds that are often called for in Scripture.

⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (New York: Abingdon, 1962):5.

¹⁰ J. Coert Rylaarsdam, "The Matrix of Worship in the Old Testament," in *Worship in Scripture and Tradition*, ed. Massey Shepherd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 45.

THE FORM OF PSALMS AND EFFECTIVE WORSHIP

The language of the psalms is poetry, which effectively communicates feeling and experience. The poetry enables readers to feel something of the psalmists' pain, frustration, or joy.

Because the author of Psalm 137 had been taken into exile in Babylon, he was deeply homesick for his hometown, Jerusalem, and the temple where God's presence had dwelt in a special way. The psalm expresses the psalmist's painful longing for home in a way that moves readers today to feel his sadness as well. The delight and profound joy of the exiles when they, in God's gracious providence, were able once again to return home is beautifully expressed in Psalm 126.

The figures of speech in the psalms help readers today enter emotionally into the experiences of the authors. In Psalm 42:7 the psalmist wrote, "All Thy breakers and Thy waves have rolled over me." Certainly his figure of speech goes beyond the physical fact of the description and conveys the desperation and helplessness a person would feel as he or she struggled to survive in a sea or river during an intense storm. Even the geographical references used in Psalm 42--the land of the Jordan, the peaks of Mount Hermon and Mount Mizar--give to a reader familiar with the area a sense of the isolation felt by this psalmist who was exiled from his beloved Jerusalem and the temple.

Comparing the enemies of the righteous with vicious, attacking animals in Psalm 7:2 or 22:12-13, enables people today to feel both the ruthlessness of the enemies and the terror experienced by the psalmist as a result of their attack.

The use of such emotive images in Israel's hymns suggests that the proper focus of worship, at least as seen in these psalms, is neither a cold intellectually stimulating sermon nor a mindless emotionalism devoid of intellectual content. Rather, the worship reflected in the psalms addresses the needs of the whole person¹¹ and is both cognitive and affective. Present-day worship needs to be designed with both of these dimensions in mind.

The biblical psalms were set to music in Israel's worship,

¹¹ Hoekema's comments are interesting in this regard. While rejecting a monistic model, he nevertheless comes to the conclusion that Scripture views man as a whole person rather than as the sum of a variety of parts (*Created in God's Image* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 222-23). He sees certain practical implications flowing from this conclusion. "The church must be concerned about the whole person. In preaching and teaching the church must address not only the minds of those to whom it ministers, but also their emotions and their wills. Preaching that merely communicates intellectual information about God or the Bible is seriously inadequate.... teaching should aim at a response that involves all aspects of the person" (ibid.).

and their poetic and musical form make the truth easier to remember than is often true in sermons today. As Allen and Borrer say, "An idea (either good or bad) set to a good melody, given rhythmic intensity and harmonic consistency, can really work its way into our minds.... music is a powerful way to get ... ideas implanted and affect the behavior of mankind. . . . What we sing we remember, because we have combined the power of intellect with emotion."¹² It is amazing to see how quickly children pick up television commercials or the theology contained in songs they learn in Sunday school or children's church. No doubt more long-lasting and life-changing results would be effected if worship services communicated a few basic biblical truths in ways that would more effectively impact both mind and emotion. Reinforcing a few basic ideas throughout the service in various ways could increase the probability that people would remember and reflect on those truths after the service ended.

The use of word pictures and images throughout the psalms would also help establish ideas and themes in the minds and memories of those exposed to them in worship, thus encouraging the meditation and reflection called for in passages like Psalm 1. Such images can also contribute to worship in another important way. Ryken talks about the power of images to influence attitudes and behavior.

People may assent to the proposition that the true end of life is not to make money and accumulate possessions, but if their minds are filled with images of big houses and fancy clothes, their actual behavior will run in the direction of materialism. People may theoretically believe in the ideals of chastity and faithful wedded love, but if their minds are filled with images of exposed bodies and songs of seduction, their sexual behavior will have a large admixture of lust and sexual license in it.¹³

Today's Western culture is particularly adept at filling the minds of believers with images that an intellectually stimulating sermon--even one that evokes plenty of "Amen's" from the congregation--will have great difficulty erasing. Ryken points out that poetry and music and effective storytelling techniques derive their power from the images they leave in the minds of people, and techniques such as these are regularly found throughout the psalms.

Worship, as seen in the psalms, focuses one's attention on the Lord in a way that stimulates both intellectually and emotion-

¹² Allen and Borrer, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, 162-63.

¹³ Leland Ryken, "The Creative Arts," in *The Making of the Christian Mind*, ed. Arthur Holmes (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 106.

ally. It encourages worshipers to remember, reflect, ponder, and meditate on the character and works of the Lord in ways that make it difficult to forget the images through which the principles were taught. Such worship glorifies God, elevating His reputation and impacting believers so that the principles are not forgotten when the benediction is pronounced.

LAMENTS AND THANKSGIVING HYMNS

Looking more specifically at two types of psalms--laments and thanksgiving psalms--leads to further implications for worship today.

Laments outnumber every other kind of psalm in the Psalter; almost a third of the psalms belong to this category. Laments have their origin in situations of distress from which the psalmists cried out to God for help and deliverance. These psalms follow a generally similar form, though they stem from a wide variety of specific situations. Sometimes they reflect community concerns; sometimes they are the cries of individuals. They reflect a wide assortment of troubles--political pressure, physical illness, loneliness, oppression, and a variety of spiritual needs.

Interestingly every lament includes an element of praise. As Anderson points out, the laments do not reflect "a pessimistic view of life," nor is there in them "a morbid concentration on human agony and guilt."¹⁴ As Barth has noted, "All the psalms are concerned not with distress as such, but with taking it before God, who they know is the judge and at the same time the redeemer with sovereign power over all distress."¹⁵ The psalmists cried out to God from the depths of their distress, confident that He had the power to release them from their dilemmas. The laments, then, are actually expressions of praise--praise offered to God in situations where His help was needed. As Miller says, the psalms are "always moving toward praise." Even in laments, "praise and thanks are in a sense the final word, the direction one is headed, in the relationship with God."¹⁶

Most prayers of believers today probably belong in the category of laments. However, it seems that the biblical laments are seldom used as models for prayers that express grief and distress. The quality of corporate worship could be enhanced by se-

¹⁴ Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 56.

¹⁵ Christoph Barth, *Introduction to the Psalms*, trans. R. A. Wilson (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1966), 38.

¹⁶ Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 66.

lecting biblical laments appropriate to the needs of the congregation and creatively incorporating them into worship services.

Thanksgiving psalms are closely related to the lament psalms. As Kraus notes, "The *todah* [thanksgiving hymn] stands in a clear and unequivocal relation to the laments of the individual."¹⁷ Some have suggested that the thanksgiving psalms are an expansion of the praise element already present in the laments, though there is clearly a difference between the two in that thanksgiving hymns come after the prayers of the laments have been answered. It is one thing to praise God in anticipation of His deliverance or on the basis of confidence that God has heard one's prayers. It is another thing to praise God in response to deliverance already experienced. Thanksgiving psalms were sung by people who in distress had experienced the goodness of God.

That the laments and thanksgiving hymns are related is seen in the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2. Hannah's inability to have children and the taunting of her husband's other wife, Penninah, caused her great distress. On one occasion when the family was at the sanctuary at Shiloh to offer sacrifices, Hannah was too upset to remain with the family at the sacrificial meal. She went into the sanctuary to pray. As she prayed, she was so distraught that her lament was not audible. Eli the priest saw her lips moving, and, not hearing any words, he supposed she was drunk. Hannah explained her situation and he assured her that God had heard her prayer and He would grant her request. Samuel was born to Hannah and after he was weaned, Hannah took him to the sanctuary to dedicate him to the Lord, and there she prayed the thanksgiving psalm found in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

The thanksgiving psalms seem to have been used in public worship, often in conjunction with a thanksgiving offering. They were meant as praise to God and also as a testimony to the congregation of God's saving work. Sometimes these psalms were stated in association with a vow made in connection with the lament. What was vowed in the laments was carried out in the psalms of thanksgiving; perhaps these psalms were sung as the worshiper brought a thanksgiving offering to the temple to celebrate the deliverance he had experienced. Psalm 66 begins with a description of God's deliverance, summarized in verse 12, "We went through fire and through water; yet Thou didst bring us out into a place of abundance." Verses 13-14 express thanksgiving: "I shall come into Thy house with burnt offerings; I shall pay Thee my vows, which my lips uttered and my mouth spoke when I

¹⁷ F. Crusemann, cited by Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 47.

was in distress." The purpose of doing this is made clear in verses 16-17, which call for others to listen to what God had done to rescue the psalmist. "Come and hear, all who fear God, and I will tell of what He has done for my soul. I cried to Him with my mouth, and He was extolled with my tongue." Verses 19-20 add words of praise: "But certainly God has heard; He has given heed to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, who has not turned away my prayer, nor His lovingkindness from me."

The public expression of thanksgiving is also clear in Psalm 40, though that psalm has no mention of an offering. The psalmist wrote, "I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation; behold I will not restrain my lips, O Lord, Thou knowest. I have not hidden Thy righteousness within my heart; I have spoken of Thy faithfulness and Thy salvation; I have not concealed Thy lovingkindness and Thy truth from the great congregation" (vv. 9-10).

Psalm 116 provides another example of the public thanksgiving and praise that seem to have been a regular part of Israel's worship. Verse 3 recounts the distress faced by the psalmist, and in verse 4 he explained what he did in his trouble. "Then I called upon the name of the Lord: O Lord, I beseech Thee, save my life!" God heard the psalmist's prayer and granted his request. The psalmist's response is recorded in verses 12-19. He wrote, "I shall pay my vows to the Lord; oh may it be in the presence of all His people" (v. 14). Then in verses 17-19 he affirmed his offering of thanksgiving to the Lord. "To Thee I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and call upon the name of the Lord. I shall pay my vows to the Lord; oh may it be in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord!"

This psalm [is] the personal tribute of a man whose prayer has found an overwhelming answer. He has come now to the temple to tell the whole assembly what has happened, and to offer to God what he had vowed to Him in his extremity.... Such psalms ... would help many another person find words for his own public thanksgiving.¹⁸

Regarding verse 19 Kidner writes,

We may note that the intensely personal faith and love which mark this psalm are not in competition with the public and localized expressions of godliness. This flame is not withdrawn, to burn alone. Placed in the midst it will kindle others, and blaze all the longer and better for it.¹⁹

¹⁸ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 407.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 411.

Anderson says about this psalm, "In the OT, individual experience and public worship are frequently fused into one whole to the advantage of the entire congregation."²⁰

The importance of thanksgiving is reflected in the frequency with which it appears in the psalms; thanksgiving clearly constituted an important element in Israel's worship. There are passages that suggest that the very act of giving thanks is pleasing to God and is one of the ways believers glorify Him. "I will praise the name of God with song, and shall magnify Him with thanksgiving. And it will please the Lord better than an ox or a young bull with horns and hoofs" (Ps. 69:30-31).

CELEBRATING DELIVERANCE

Two aspects of the thanksgiving psalms can be incorporated into worship today. The first stems from the clear connection between laments and thanksgiving songs found in Scripture. Church congregations are often informed of a need and encouraged to pray about that need. Sometimes those laments may even approach the intensity of the biblical laments. Often, though, when the prayer is answered, there is little public acknowledgement of the fact, and rarely if ever does the congregation celebrate the deliverance effected by God in the way suggested by the thanksgiving hymns.

Even testimonies in church services of what God is doing in people's lives fall short of the biblical examples. Such testimonies often come from the same individuals and often deal with trivial matters. The pattern in the psalms, however, reveals the proper connection between a petition, its answer (i.e., God's powerful, gracious response), and the believer's thankful response before the congregation.

One should note, nevertheless, that the thanksgiving hymns do not seem to be correlated specifically with lament psalms.²¹ Nor does the Bible refer to individuals going to the tabernacle or

²⁰ A. A. Anderson, *Psalms*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 790.

²¹ In a statement typical of most commentators, Tremper Longman III says, "The amazing thing about the psalms is that though they were born out of particular life experiences, their content is remarkably devoid of any references to the particular events that brought them into being" (*How to Read the Psalms* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988], 42). He further notes that this lack of historical specificity in the psalms is in strong contrast to what is found in other parts of the old Testament (e.g., Judg. 5 or Exod. 15). Anderson says that "any reconstruction of the particular circumstances (such as is often attempted in the exegesis of the Psalms) presents us with a generalization of what often happens in typical cases" (Psalms 30). This is because "they were, primarily, intended as vehicles to convey the feelings and attitude of any worshiper in a similar situation" (*ibid.*).

temple to voice a lament psalm and then going later to offer a thanksgiving song along with their thankoffering. Kraus, though, has suggested that "during the great worship festivals of Israel one who was rescued from distress and suffering had opportunity to present his thankoffering in the circle of family members, friends and other witnesses, to report concerning distress and deliverance and to sing praises."²²

Several factors do suggest that a connection between lament and thanksgiving was recognized in Israel's worship. For example the psalm in Jonah 2 is set in a context that clearly implies it is a lament; the contents of the poem, though, read like a thanksgiving hymn. The poem was no doubt written after the deliverance had been accomplished, and given the situation out of which it came, a public lament would hardly have been possible. At the same time the connection between the difficulty/lament and the thankful public response to God's deliverance is clearly seen in the poem.

The association between lament and thanksgiving is also made in the part of the standard thanksgiving psalm form that reviews the difficulty and usually mentions the psalmist's cry to God for help. Often the thanksgiving is connected with a vow made to God during the difficulty, which helps show the association between the two types of psalms.

DIDACTIC DIMENSION

A second feature of thanksgiving psalms that could be incorporated into worship today is their didactic dimension. Commenting on Psalm 22:22-31, Miller says, "The singer who has been delivered stands in the midst of the congregation and tells of the Lord's power (cf. 35:18; 40:9) that the children of Israel hearing of God's great power and goodness will themselves praise and glorify the Lord."²³ Psalm 34, which has characteristics of both a thanksgiving psalm and a wisdom psalm, illustrates the didactic element well. The author praised God for delivering him from a difficult situation, and he took his experience as normative for others. He cried out to God from his distress and God heard and delivered him. That then became the pattern for others, and the psalmist encouraged them to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (v. 8), to experience the blessing that comes from trusting Him. In these songs the poets saw in God's deliverance a concrete example of His grace and power and so their experience became

²² Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 52.

²³ Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 72.

an occasion for stating what God is like. With the focus in these psalms on the character and power of God, the psalmists called on others to learn from their experience and to join them in giving praise to God. The psalmists' experiences pointed to the works of God the community could meditate on, thus learning more about His character. These expressions of thanksgiving were directed to God and elevated His reputation, and in this respect the biblical pattern seems to stand at variance with at least some modern practice. As Longman observes, "The 'sharing times' that occur in modern church services and fellowship groups are too often an excuse to praise ourselves. The psalmist is a model for 'sharing' as he directs the attention of the congregation away from himself and toward God."²⁴

Psalm 107, containing elements of both thanksgiving and praise, suggests how these psalms might be used in worship. Scholars are not agreed on the literary history of this psalm and the way it was used.²⁵ It begins, however, by calling those whom God has redeemed from difficulty to acknowledge that fact. Verses 4-32 mention four groups that can attest to the Lord's goodness in delivering them. In each instance they faced a difficult and threatening situation: "they cried out to the Lord in their trouble; He delivered them out of their distresses" (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28). Each example provides a basis for the redeemed to "give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness, and for His wonders to the sons of men!" (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). According to verse 32, they were to "extol Him also in the congregation of the people, and praise Him at the seat of the elders." Anderson suggests that this "psalm may have been used at a communal thankoffering at which various groups of people offered their thanksgiving sacrifice and their grateful praise."²⁶ Certainly this thanksgiving psalm could easily be used as a basis for a service in which people from the congregation who have experienced God's deliverance from various difficulties could publicly give thanks to God for His **רַחֲמֵי** ("lovingkindness" or "loyal love") and for His wonders.

The thanksgiving psalms also share a perspective with salvation-history psalms--a category to which they are related. The perspective is related to the idea of meditation and reflecting on the works of God found throughout the psalms, and this perspective may help account for their use in Israel's worship. Examples

²⁴ Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 146.

²⁵ A summary of the suggestions and a helpful bibliography is in Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 60-63.

²⁶ Anderson, *Psalms*, 749.

of salvation-history psalms are Psalms 78, 105, and 106, which review significant events in Israel's history, and Nehemiah 9 shows how one of these songs was used. When the postexilic community in Jerusalem gathered to confess their sins, the Levites used a salvation-history psalm similar to those found in Psalms. The hymn recounts God's past dealings with His people, beginning with His choice of Abraham and moving through the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings, and the Conquest. Both the faithfulness of God in keeping His promise to Abraham and the unfaithfulness of the Israelites in responding to that goodness are declared. The people's reflection on their history caused them to sign a covenant as a people (Neh. 9:38), in which they agreed to "walk in God's Law . . . and to keep and observe all the commandments of God" (10:29).

Thus reflecting on and studying the works of God--both in history (the salvation-history psalms) and more recently in the lives of individuals (the thanksgiving psalms)--provides concrete examples of what God is like and gives a firm basis for praising Him. It also provides important reference points for believers as they move into an unseen future.

CONCLUSION

The psalms affirm the importance of reflecting and meditating on God's truth and His works. The psalms are structured in a way that encourages in worship the same persistent focus on God called for in Deuteronomy 6. Israel's worship facilitated and enhanced this concentration, and the psalms reveal several techniques that contribute significantly to the effective accomplishment of this goal. Worship that involves the entire person and that focuses attention on God and His graciousness both in history and in the lives of His people today encourages the kind of meditative reflection on God and His truth that is essential for spiritual success and the enjoyment of God's blessing. Worship that effectively uses stories, poetry, and music to plant and reinforce images of God's truth in the minds of the people can contribute greatly to their growth toward maturity. Worship that displays for people the connection between crying out to God in their distress, the gracious deliverance that God brings, and their public thanksgiving to God for His help serves an important didactic function and helps establish good habits in God's people. Recognizing principles such as these in the Book of Psalms and incorporating them into the life and worship of the church today can play a major role in helping believers develop godly character and in equipping them to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

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