EMOTIONAL SUBJECTIVITY IN TEACHING/PREACHING THE PSALMS

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A frequently overlooked, and crucial, element in the exposition of the Psalms is the intended emotional subjectivity of poetry. This emotional subjectivity can make rigid structural analysis less important than in other genres of literature. Approaching the Psalms with this recognition will greatly assist expositors in understanding the Psalms and communicating them.

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Introduction

I thoroughly enjoy analysis and logical argument. My educational background, both in high school and college, emphasized it. Seminary training reinforced it with parsed verbs, declined nouns, and stressed syntactical relationships. Ph.D. studies culminated in a dissertation analyzing an element of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. At the same time, I enjoy reading, studying and preaching the Psalms. Bringing these two interests together, my training led me to follow an analytical structure as I prepared sermons. I have a notebook on the Psalms with many analyzed and translated, in many instances with line diagrams filling the pages. Yet, through all that study I was bothered by a nagging question: Why do so many ordinary Christians gain such personal, spiritual benefit from the Psalms when they have little or no training in biblical studies?[1]

In June 1983 of my pastoral ministry, I began to discover an answer to that question. I started a twenty-three sermon series on Psalm 119 in that month. Numerous times in those weeks I struggled with analyzing its various stanzas. Even while some writers confidently assert dogmatic divisions within each stanza,[2] a perusal of

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[1] This is a question critical scholars are also studying as witnessed by a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Baltimore, November 2013: Christo Lombaard, "Mysticism and Understanding: Murmurs of Meaning(fullness)—Unheard Silence of Psalm 1."

[2] One based on line diagramming is George J. Zemek, *The Word of God in the Child of God* (Mango, FL: self-published, 2005), 81–129.

commentaries reveals that often there is no consensus as to what comprises a fitting analysis of a particular stanza. Indeed, Alexander,[3] Delitzsch,[4] Kirkpatrick,[5] Leupold,[6] Perowne,[7] and Hakham[8] for examples, identify no divisions within any of the psalm's stanzas, but merely deal with each verse in sequence. On the other hand, VanGemeren[9] sometimes recognizes specific divisions in stanzas, but sees them differently than Zemek. Phillips[10] and Ross.[11] These men divide the following representative stanzas like this:

	Beth stanza	**Gimel stanza**	**Daleth stanza**
Phillips	9–12, 13–16	17–20, 21–24	25–29, 30–32
Ross	9, 10–14, 15–16	17–18, 19–20, 21–24	25, 26–29, 30–32
VanGemeren	9, 10–16	17–20, 21–24	25, 26–27, 28–29, 30–32
Zemek	9–11, 12, 13–16	17–21, 22–24	25–27, 28–32

Why does such diversity exist? Consider: Zemek bases his divisions on his line diagramming of the Hebrew text; Ross has written a Hebrew grammar; VanGemeren is a professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages; and Phillips is an experienced expositor. So, who is correct? Knowing and studying the Hebrew text obviously does not bring unanimity. Should it? How does a pastor/teacher decide?

Reading Poetry Effectively

I solved my problem concerning Psalm 119 by coordinating my analytical study with reading each stanza numerous times, often aloud, in Hebrew and various translations, until I "felt" it.[12] I then organized my sermon outline according to that emo-

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[3] Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Psalms: Translated and Explained*, 1873 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973).

[4] Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rpt. 1968).

[5] A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: University Press, 1939).

[6] H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, rpt. 1977).

[7] J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 1, 1878 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, rpt. 1966).

[8] Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003).

[9] Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 739–43.

[10] John Phillips, *Exploring the Psalms* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1988), 2:268–90.

[11] Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1985), 880.

[12] Those who lack Hebrew training will still benefit from reading multiple English translations numerous times until they grasp the emotional impact of a psalm.

tional understanding. Someone may immediately respond, "But, isn't that subjective?" Does not Kaiser say that "we should be warned that the subjective is a far less reliable guide to sound exegesis"?[13]

To this I answer unapologetically, yes, it is subjective. After all, we are reading poetry, and poetry is intended to reach us emotionally—subjectively. Quoting Chisholm, "A [Hebrew] poem is a literary composition in parallelistic verse which conveys experiences, ideas and emotions in a vivid and imaginative way and utilizes imagery more extensively than prose does."[14] This requires the reader to enter emotionally, imaginatively, into the poem. Lee expresses this well: "The initial response to a poem may not be in terms of ideas or logical content at all, but rather in terms of pleasure or pain, activity or repose—in short, of emotive content. The interpreter should read the poem aloud—several times over—and permit himself the luxury of a completely subjective response before beginning the objective analysis."[15] Although this advice runs contrary to much of our exegetical training, when it comes to the poetry of Scripture its value is profound. Reading a psalm many times aloud is crucial. Reading silently does not allow the interpreter to hear the sounds, to enter into the feeling of the poet. "Read so as to hear the sounds of the words in your mind. Poetry is written to be heard."[16] Additionally, "No one understands a poem fully at a first reading—no, nor at a second or a third."[17]

Yes, poetry can be analyzed. It is a language of images, tangible things (e.g. sheep, shepherd, hills, water, leaf, path). It is a language of figures of speech, drawing on metaphors and similes. Poetry is a language of hyperbole. It is a language of comparison. Poetry is a language of concentration, using fewer words to mean more; indeed it "is the most compact and concentrated form of speech possible."[18]

Words are composed of three parts: sound, denotation, and connotation. Denotation refers to the dictionary meaning(s) of a word. Connotation refers to what a word implies beyond that denotation. "The word *home*, for instance, by denotation means only a place where one lives, but by connotation it suggests security, love, comfort, and family."[19] Connotation is crucial for the poet, "for it is one of the means by which he can concentrate or enrich his meaning—say more in fewer words."[20] This principle is critical in poetry, including biblical poetry. Indeed, "the difference

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[13] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 227.

[14] Robert C. Chisholm, Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 169. Fisch asserts: "The one book of the Bible that, more than any other . . . , seems to offer itself as a model of lyrical subjectivity and has generally been seen as such is the book of Psalms" [Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana U Press, 1988), 106].

[15] Charlotte I. Lee, *Oral Reading of the Scriptures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 144.

[16] Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 5th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 19.

[17] Alexander Haddow, *On the Teaching of Poetry* (London: Blackie & Son, 1949), 20.

[18] J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 15.

[19] Perrine, *Sound and Sense*, 35.

[20] Ibid., 36.

between the writer using language to communicate information and the poet is this: the practical writer will always attempt to confine his words to one meaning at a time; the poet will often take advantage of the fact that the word has more than one meaning by using it to mean more than one thing at the same time."[21]

Analysis assists in understanding those elements. However, more than analysis is required. That is because poetry is a language of emotion. Until we "feel" a poem we do not truly join with the intent of the author of the poem. In seeking to feel the poem, however, we must not ignore the structure. Poetry can be partially understood through analysis; but, it must not stop there.

Understanding Psalms Analytically

Identifying Biblical Poetry

A preliminary requirement in interpreting the poetry of the Psalms is the identification of what constitutes Old Testament poetry. For many years, scholars knew poetry was in the Scriptures; the poetry of the Psalms was assumed. The question was, how is poetry recognized? Kaiser answers by observing that Hebrew poetry generally avoids: "(1) the use of the definite article; (2) the sign of the accusative case…; (3) the conjunction [waw] …; (4) the so-called relative pronoun (… 'which, who, that') and (5) the consecutive or conversive forms of the verb (such as the waw-conversive with the imperfect which gives the narrative past tense….")[22] A distinct advantage of recent English translations is the identification of poetry in the way the text is printed on the page. About one-third of the Old Testament is poetic, with Psalms being the most obviously known.

Analysis following good hermeneutical principles has value in studying biblical poetry. For example, Garrett encourages preachers to focus on analysis in preaching the Psalms: "every psalm can be analyzed to determine its structure…. In most cases, the psalmist's meaning and message will in some way be reflected in the structure of the psalm, and often understanding a psalm's structure can significantly clarify what it's all about."[23] However, we must remember that not everything in interpreting the Hebrew poetry of Psalms lends itself to ready analysis.

Rhythm and Meter in Old Testament Poetry

Modern poetry commonly uses rhythm and meter as distinguishing characteristics. In contrast, identifying rhythm and meter in the Psalms is extraordinarily difficult. Bratcher and Reyburn elucidate reasons why such is the case. For one, the "accent marks and vowels we have in our Hebrew editions of the Bible were fixed at

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[21] Ibid., 37.

[22] Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 213–14. For further discussion of this subject, see: Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 307; and, Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman. *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 24 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 59–66.

[23] Duane A. Garrett, "Preaching from the Psalms and Proverbs," *Preaching the Old Testament*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 102.

least a thousand years after most of the poems were composed."[24] During those intervening years, sounds no doubt changed and modified. Another reason is, "Because these ancient poems were not written down in poetic lines, it is not always possible to know where one line ends and the next begins."[25]

For these reasons, scholars have generally avoided psalm analysis on the basis of rhyme and meter. Garrett even asserts, "For myself, I doubt meter existed in Hebrew poetry and more strongly believe that if it did exist, we have not yet figured out how it worked. The preacher, in my opinion, should disregard references to meter in commentaries on the psalms."[26]

Areas to Study in Old Testament Poetry

Interpreters can observe other characteristics of a psalm, however. Commentaries often give special attention to such elements as acrostic arrangement, alliteration, chiasm, comparison, ellipsis, metaphor, metonymy, personification, simile, and word play. Kaiser stresses the importance of analyzing the strophes (the stanzas) in poetry, asserting that "what the paragraph is to the exegete of prose, the strophe is to the exegete of poetry."[27] This information may be crucial to particular meanings and nuances within the psalm. Hill and Walton provide an excellent overview of the elements within Hebrew poetry, stressing rhythm of thought, rhythm of sound, and rhythm of form.[28] Furthermore, the preacher should not neglect the sensory imagery in poetry. Eight kinds of sensory images may occur in poetry: "visual (sight), auditory (hearing), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), tactile (touch), kinetic (physical movement), kinesthetic (muscular involvement, awareness of body position and tension), and thermal (hot and cold)."[29]

Parallelism in Old Testament Poetry

Perhaps the most discussed element in interpreting biblical poetry is that of parallelism. The groundbreaking work of Lowth in this area opened new doors in understanding Hebrew poetry.[30] Scholars continue to use his definition of parallelism: "The

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[24] Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reyburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 3.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Garrett, "Preaching from the Psalms and Proverbs," 113. See also Susan E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: University Press, 1994), 44–68.

[27] Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 214. A technical discussion which differentiates a strophe from a stanza can be observed in J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 87–140), but many scholars simply view them synonymously [Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 39–41].

[28] Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 314–18.

[29] Judy E. Yordon, *Roles in Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque: Brown & Benchmark, 1993), 307.

[30] Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1753). Online at: http://books.google.com/books?id=Y3GsBHeXjmgC&dq=robert+lowth,+lectures+on+the+sacred+poetry+of+the+hebrews&pg=RA2–PR25&ots=jZ20d58tk8&sig=uJby3uXxNfWmQoLXxQ–

correspondence of one verse or line with another, I call parallelism. When a proposition is delivered, and a second is subjoined to it, or drawn under it, equivalent, or contrasted with it in sense, or similar to it in the form of grammatical construction, these I call parallel lines; and the words or phrases, answering one to another in the corresponding lines, parallel terms."[31] Lowth focused his study on three types: synonymous, antithetic and synthetic. In the decades following Lowth, scholars have discussed parallelism in detail.[32] In general, six categories of parallelism help me in understanding the poetry of the Old Testament, including the Psalms. Observe how each one heightens the emotions in some way.

Synonymous parallelism is where nearly identical ideas are expressed. A thought is repeated with equivalent expression.

> "Hear this, all peoples;
>   Give ear, all inhabitants of the world" (Ps 49:1)

Antithetic parallelism occurs when a statement is made, and then a contrasting thought is stated to confirm or emphasize the first assertion.

> "A gentle answer turns away wrath,
>   But a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov 15:1)

Synthetic parallelism makes an assertion, and the following statement(s) complete(s) the thought by adding to it or explaining it.

> "He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
>   Which yields its fruit in its season,
>   And its leaf does not wither,
>   And in whatever he does, he prospers" (Ps 1:3)

In **climactic parallelism** a statement is made, and then the following statement(s) proceed(s) step-by-step to build up to a climax of thought.

> "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.

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[31] Robert Lowth, *Isaiah: A New Translation, with a Preliminary Dissertation and Notes, Critical, Philological, and Explanatory*, 10th ed. (Boston: Pierce, 1834), ix. Online at: http://books.google.com/books?id=X8my5z3hQtQC&dq=robert+lowth+isaiah+a+new+ translation&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=uXxKpM60w–&sig=jVd7MTWshQjQ3bUlrqAPKy-POxiM

[32] For example, see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), 176–80.

Worship the LORD in holy array" (Ps 29:1–2)

Comparative parallelism presents an assertion which is followed by a statement in comparison.

> "As far as the east is from the west,
> So far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Ps 103:12)

The final type is **introverted parallelism**, occurring in a four-line, or eight-line, expression. In a four-line instance, the first line is parallel to the fourth, with lines two and three parallel to each other, a chiastic arrangement. In an eight-line expression, lines one and two parallel to lines seven and eight, and lines three and four parallel to lines five and six.

> "If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
> May my right hand forget her skill,
> May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
> If I do not remember you" (Ps 137:5–6)

Analysis of Old Testament poetry is valuable. Such analysis contributes to our emotional understanding of the Psalms, but is incomplete by itself. Indeed, "The trick is to learn how to read poetry in a way that respects its original, heart-targeted intention without doing so much analysis that we suck the life out of it."[33] As Arthurs observes, "The psalms are personal. But how can we turn subjective **experience** [emphasis his] into public address? The psalms are lyrical—full of emotion and image. How, though, can we translate highly artistic language into vernacular? You can see why some preachers avoid the psalms. Their intuition tells them that we murder when we dissect."[34] This apprehension brings us to the next stage of grasping the significance of the Psalms.

Understanding the Psalms Emotionally

Numerous poems, biblical, Jewish, and Christian contemplate the wonders of God's creation. Additionally, many extol the qualities, characteristics, and lives of people. This should not surprise us. God Himself is the original Poet. Paul informs us that God's creation is His "poem" ("what has been made," *poiēma*, Rom 1:20). Paul further identifies that we who know Christ are God's poems (His "workmanship," *poiēma,* Eph 2:10). Since God himself is the Poet Par Excellence, it is no wonder that His Word contains a great amount of poetry.

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[33] Tremper Longman III, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 131.

[34] Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 39.

Emotional Intention

Fee and Stuart assert that the psalms, as musical poems, are "intended to appeal to the emotions, to evoke feelings rather than propositional thinking, and to stimulate a response on the part of the individual that goes beyond a mere cognitive understanding of certain facts—this, after all, is the very reason musical poems are so well-loved."[35] Osborne writes that poetry is intended to be emotive, that prose "was inadequate to express the deep yearnings of the soul, and poetry as an emotional, deep expression of faith and worship became a necessity."[36] Estes contends that "As poems, the psalms endeavor to *recreate* the author's experience in the reader, rather than just *report* [emphasis his] that experience…. Consequently, they must be appreciated as well as analyzed."[37] Stevenson notes "that a psalm belongs primarily to the realm of emotion rather than to the realm of logical thought,"[38] and Alter avers that the Psalms are "written out of deep and often passionate faith," and that they "articulate the emotional freight" of the poet.[39] Lee further observes that "Poetry is a record of an emotional experience to be shared…, [that the poet] is usually concerned rather with an emotional or aesthetic response to the idea…, [and that] the poet intends to communicate something beyond fact or opinion."[40]

The preacher of Psalms must realize that in "poetry, the logical content and the emotive content are blended so completely that it is nearly impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins."[41] Indeed, poetry is "concerned with an emotional or aesthetic response to an idea. Even in didactic poetry, where the idea may be of first importance, provoking emotive response is the force behind the idea."[42] "We do not understand a great poem till we have felt it through, and as far as possible re-created in ourselves the emotions which it originally carried."[43]

Tornfelt correctly notes that "the psalms are more like spiritual journals than systematic theologies."[44] Although doctrinal elements are often contained in the Psalms, more as presuppositions than as declarative propositions, the Psalms do "not present specific doctrinal guidelines but rather examples of how to communicate one's deepest emotions and needs to God and how to respond in praise and thanksgiving to what God has done…. Honesty with God is an important lesson to be

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[35] Gordon D. Fee, and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 207.

[36] Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 181.

[37] Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 144.

[38] Dwight E. Stevenson, *In the Biblical Preacher's Workshop* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), 159.

[39] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 113. Alter provides a good overview of biblical poetry, beginning with the dynamic of parallelism.

[40] Lee, *Oral Reading of the Scriptures,* 143.

[41] Charlotte I. Lee and Timothy Gura, *Oral Interpretation*, 8th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 342.

[42] Ibid., 343.

[43] Haddow, *On the Teaching of Poetry*, 27.

[44] John V. Tornfelt, "Preaching the Psalms: Understanding the Chiastic Structures for Greater Clarity," *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 2:2 (December 2002): 5.

learned from Psalms. The psalmists tell God exactly how they feel, and it often does not sound very spiritual or mature."[45] Because of that, preachers should not quickly pass over the pain, mourning, confusion, anxiety, and suffering in the Psalms. Let those emotions connect with our contemporary audiences, since they commonly feel the same things.

Several elements within the Psalms provide direction to understanding the emotion contained in them. Although scholars do not always agree on the value of each of the following elements, their cumulative contributions direct us for effectively preaching and teaching the timeless truths from this timeless book.

Parallelism

Parallelism assists the interpreter in understanding the analysis of a psalm, as seen above. It also makes a significant emotional impact. Arthurs comments that a "rhetorical effect parallelism prompts is meditation…. Hebrew poetry is a prism that turns this way and that so that we catch different hues of a single idea, image, or emotion…. Thus, Hebrew poetry is written not for speed readers or skimmers."[46] Arthurs points out an additional effect of the parallel structure of Hebrew poetry: "Lines of Hebrew poetry do not simply repeat or contrast ideas; they almost always intensify ideas."[47]

Titles of the Psalms

The titles of many Psalms enable us to grasp the emotional context of their backgrounds. Scholars continue to debate the historicity of the titles, and what many of the particular terms used in them even mean. Despite this, the titles provide valuable assistance in grasping the emotionality of the writers.

A complete discussion of the titles is beyond the scope of this article, but their study can help to identify such things as author, circumstances, and type of composition. This assists the expositor to enter into the emotionality of the psalm. Bullock presents a helpful summary of the elements within the titles: authorship, historical origin, literary features, liturgical use, and musical notations.[48] Additionally, Estes cogently demonstrates the reliability of the psalm titles.[49] Following the example of Habakkuk 3:1, 19, Thirtle suggests that many difficulties in psalm titles are solved by considering certain statements to be at the head of a psalm: "statement of its class (a Prayer), its author (Habakkuk), and its special character (Shigionoth)"; and other statements to be at the end of a psalm: "a statement that is musical and exclusively

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[45] Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 270.

[46] Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 43.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 121–23.

[49] Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 141–44.

so."[50] This approach may solve many problems concerning the title contents which seem disconnected with their Psalms.

Literary Types of Psalms

Understanding the literary type of each psalm assists greatly in grasping its emotional force. "To discover how best to restructure a particular psalm so as to evoke an attitude or emotion in today's readers equivalent to that experienced by the original readers, the translator [and preacher] must try to discover the psalmist's intention in writing the particular psalm being translated [preached]."[51] Although scholars do not fully agree on how to categorize the types of Psalms, and some Psalms fit in more than one category, Bratcher and Reyburn identify the following types,[52] to which I have added the Psalms that seem to fit under each category.

Laments. These contain complaints to God, either by an individual or by the corporate community**,** about some difficulty or painful situation. Some or all of these elements are often found in them: a cry to God, a lament, expression of trust in God, a petition, and a promise of thanksgiving or vow of praise. Individual laments are found in Psalms 3–7, 9, 10, 12–14, 17, 22, 25–28, 31, 35, 38–40, 42–43, 51–57, 59, 61, 63–64, 69–71, 77, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 139–143. Corporate laments are found in Psalms 9, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79–80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129, 137. Psalms 51 and 130 are also classified as "penitential psalms." Preaching these Psalms requires entering into the emotional upheaval of the psalmists, feeling the pain, experiencing the problem, and calling to God in that felt agony.

The ultimate lament psalm is 88. This psalm is a lament with no thanksgiving, no praise, no resolution of the problem. It has a cry of distress (vv. 1–2), the psalmist's troubles (vv. 3–5), the afflictions God brought (vv. 6–9), questions for God (vv. 10–12), and final cries of distress and affliction (vv. 13–18).[53] We in ministry frequently confront individuals experiencing this type of agony. Instead of seeking to provide ready answers (e.g. glibly quoting Rom 8:28), let us preach God's Word with empathy, entering into the emotional frustrations, and honestly admitting we may not know what the outcome will be.

Hymns (Praise). These are songs of praise to God, which generally contain three elements: "(1) a call to praise God; (2) the reason why praise should be offered to God; (3) another call to praise God."[54] Individual hymns of praise are Psalms 8, 19, 23, 103–104, 145–146. Corporate hymns of praise are Psalms 29, 33, 36, 65–67, 91, 95, 100, 105, 111, 113–115, 117, 135–136, 147–150. Fee and Stuart observe three categories of these hymns: God is praised as Creator, as protector and benefactor of

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[50] James William Thirtle, *The Titles of the Psalms: Their Nature and Meaning Explained* (London: Henry Frowde, 1905), 12.

[51] Bratcher and Reyburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*, 2.

[52] Ibid., 2–3.

[53] David M. Howard, "The Rhetoric of Lament: Implications for Ethical Appropriation," paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, Valley Forge, PA, 16 November 2005, 4–6. See also David M. Howard, "The Psalms and Current Study," *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, eds. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005).

[54] Bratcher and Reyburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*, 2.

Israel, and as God of history.[55] Preaching these Psalms calls for the expositor to have that same emotional desire to extol the glories of our Lord that the psalmists had.

Thanksgiving. Psalms in this category express gratitude to God for His deliverance. They include an explanation of what the deliverance is from, recognition that God gave the deliverance, and thanks for what He did. An individual's thanksgiving is seen in Psalms 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 41, 66, 92, 103, 108, 116, 118, 138. Corporate thanksgiving is in Psalms 65, 67–68, 75, 107, 124, 136. The expositor must feel the deliverance that God has given and share the joys of that deliverance when preaching these Psalms.

Songs of Confidence. In these Psalms, full deliverance has not yet been experienced in some trial. Yet, the psalmist is confident that God will bring about salvation, and answer prayer. An individual's confidence is found in Psalms 11, 18, 32, 34, 40, 62, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138. Corporate confidence occurs in Psalms 65, 67, 75, 81, 107, 124–125, 136. Every pastor, in personal life and in public ministry, experiences numerous situations where trials continue and prayers are not immediately answered as we expect. The emotional upheavals in such occasions bring us in faith to these Psalms.

Hymns of Zion. Jerusalem, Zion, is extolled in these Psalms. It is the place of God's presence, His dwelling. This was a theme of great assurance to ancient Israel. Although God's presence is not limited to such a geographical location today nor was it then, the preacher can easily apply the emotional comfort and encouragement of these Psalms as we remember that we are the temple of God. These Psalms include 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122.

Enthronement Psalms. These Psalms acknowledge God's sovereignty over Israel and over the world. As we look around us at a world beset by wars, plagues, famines, and disasters (both natural and manmade), we must enter into the emotional peace and assurance which these Psalms communicate: God is still on His throne, and we can trust Him. Psalms in this category include 24, 29, 47, 82, 93, 95–99.

Royal Psalms. These Psalms praise the king of Israel, both in the past and in the Messianic future. The emotional confidence that God brings ultimate victory over all His enemies, through His chosen representative, is a truth needed for ancient Israel and for us today. We who preach God's Word must "feel" this assurance as well as "know" it. These Psalms include 2, 18, 20–21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144.

Pilgrim Psalms. Many Psalms listed in this category also fit in other categories. Worshipers sang these Psalms on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate a feast. Although Christians do not make annual pilgrimages to a temple festival, we do make routine trips to our local churches for worship. Preachers can use these Psalms to encourage believers to prepare themselves emotionally through song as they make their journey to church each Lord's day. Psalms in this category include 43, 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 120–134,

Wisdom Psalms. These Psalms teach God's people His Law, His Word. They encourage obedience to the Lord, and censure evil. Obedience to God brings His blessings on life. The emotional impact of these truths on today's believer is just as needed as it was in the time of ancient Israel. These Psalms include 1 (often seen as

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[55] Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 176–77.

the introductory psalm to the entire Psalter), 27, 34, 36–37, 49, 73, 78, 105–106, 111–112, the classic example of 119, 127–128, 133.

Liturgies. Some Psalms connect directly to the temple worship and service. Just as ancient worshipers observed various types of worship activity, so do today's believers. Our whole being, including emotions, must be involved in that worship. Psalms in this category are 15, 24, 30, 38, 50, 70, 75, 85, 92, 100,

Imprecatory. Although, Bratcher and Reyburn omit this category of Psalms, it also needs to be included. They are usually lament Psalms, but in these the poet's desire for vindication and God's judgment on His enemies is pronounced. These Psalms especially use hyperbole in communicating the emotional upheavals of the writers. Believers of all ages have identified with the spirit of these Psalms when undergoing severe persecutions. Psalms of this nature include 7, 12, 35, 52, 55, 57–59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137, 140.

Messianic. Again, Bratcher and Reyburn omit this category. Many Psalms identified in one of the above categories also contain Messianic elements, and can be examined from that perspective. These include "those that refer to the king and his rule (2, 18, 20–21, 24, 45, 61, 72, 89, 91, 110, 118, 132, 144), and those that treat man and his life generally (8, 16, 22, 35, 40–41, 55, 69, 102, 109)."[56]

The Fulcrum of a Psalm

Observing the "fulcrum" of a psalm lets us see its emotional turning point. Oral interpreters of poetic literature can teach biblical scholars concerning this emphasis. Biblical commentators will occasionally observe that a particular turning point can occur in a psalm. Commenting on Psalm 8, Smith correctly observes: "One of the striking things about this particular psalm is the sharp rhetorical turn that the psalmist makes in the middle of the psalm," which occurs in verse 4.[57] Smith makes a similar observation concerning psalm 32, stating that verse 5 "acts like a hinge or turning point."[58] Arthurs takes a similar approach in his comment on psalm 77, stating that the "first nine verses angle sharply down, but then the psalm hinges in verses 10–12 and swings upward from that point onward…."[59] However, biblical scholars rarely define or describe what the turning point is. The concept of a fulcrum clarifies this.

A fulcrum is the balancing point, that point at which two parts of a poem balance each other. A teeter-totter illustrates it. That point on which the teeter-totter is balanced is the fulcrum, and that fulcrum can move, depending on the weight of the two people on each end of the teeter–totter. A teeter-totter with a 100-pound boy on each end will have the fulcrum in the middle, and the two ends will be equal in length. However, place a 100 pound boy on one end and his 200 pound father on the other end, and the fulcrum must be moved to the side closer to the father in order to balance the teeter-totter. Even though the two sides are "unequal" in length, they are still

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[56] Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 137.

[57] Kenneth W. Smith, "Preaching the Psalms with Respect for Their Inspired Design," *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 3:2 (December 2003), 15.

[58] Ibid., 20.

[59] Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 53.

"balanced." "If the fulcrum occurs approximately in the middle of a poem…, the poem is said to be *symmetrical*. If the fulcrum is off-center, the poem is…*asymmetrical* [emphasis hers]."[60] The poet of a psalm likewise expresses himself in a particular emotional tone until he reaches the "fulcrum," the turning point, and then the tone of the psalm changes, sometimes remarkably. Interpreters must observe where that fulcrum occurs, why it is placed where it is, and what the emotional shift is. The fulcrum is crucial in presenting the emotional impact of the psalm and communicating the author's intent. The fulcrum "may be a single word or an entire unit, but it is the point at which the poem turns or balances…. The fulcrum is not always as clearly evident in biblical poetry as in modern poetry, but an awareness of its presence can help immeasurably in retaining unity and building to the climax."[61] The fulcrum may even occur between two verses in a psalm. Here are some examples of fulcrums in the Psalms.

In Psalm 8, the fulcrum occurs at verse 4:

> "What is man that You take thought of him,
> And the son of man that You care for him?"

Whether the psalm considers the marvels of infants, adversaries, the heavens, animals or fish, the wonder of it all is that God cares for man, and in particular the son of man.

In Psalm 23, the fulcrum comes in verse 4:

> "for You are with me."

Each element in the psalm focuses around that particular emphasis. "The LORD is my shepherd"—why? Because He is with me. "I shall not want"—why? Because He is with me.

In Psalm 73, we find the fulcrum at verses 16–17:

> "When I pondered to understand this,
>   it was troublesome in my sight
>   until I came into the sanctuary of God;
> Then I perceived their end."

The psalm opens with a statement of assurance (v. 1), but then descends into questioning, confusion, discouragement, frustration, bitterness, perhaps even anger, at the prosperity of the wicked and the pains of the righteous in this life (vv. 2–15). At the fulcrum (vv. 16–17), however, the tone changes. Following that, there is a growing crescendo of faith and certainty to the climax at v. 28.

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[60] Yordon, *Roles in Interpretation*, 332.

[61] Lee, *Oral Reading of the Scriptures*, 146.

In Psalm 90, the fulcrum is found at verse 12:

> "So teach us to number our days,
>   that we may present to You a heart of wisdom."

The reality is that a person's life is brief in contrast to God who is eternal (vv. 1–6). The problem is that a person's brief life is sinful in contrast to God who confronts us (vv. 7–11). The balancing fact is that God stands ready to meet the needs of our lives (vv. 13–17). So what should we do? The fulcrum answers in v. 12.

Illustrating from Psalm 71

I will illustrate the principles enunciated in more detail from psalm 71, demonstrating the value of identifying the emotional elements and focusing our preaching and teaching on those elements. Since no title occurs in the Hebrew text of the psalm, no insight is gained from it. The Septuagint, however, has the following title: "By David. *By* the sons of Jonadab, and the first that were taken captive."[62] This title "may preserve an authentic tradition of its use in the exile."[63]

A problem in studying the Psalms is that our English versions are limited by the amount of line space available on a page. Because of that, the parallel structure of a psalm may be obscured. As I now study a psalm, therefore, I re–write it so that I can see its parallelism more clearly. In that process, I also seek to observe key elements, such as repeated words, synonyms, word plays, etc., anything which helps me appreciate the emotional impact of the psalm. I identify these through use of colors, type variety, underlining, etc.

A particularly crucial Hebrew phrase in this psalm, repeated verbatim, occurs in verses 13 and 24: *mᵃbaqsheey raaʻaatiy*. Many English translations render it with different words in the two verses. The NASB has "who seek to injure me" (v. 13) and "who seek my hurt" (v. 24); the ESV has "Who seek my hurt" (v. 13) and "who sought to do me hurt" (v. 24); the NIV is closer with "those who want to harm me" (v. 13), and "those who wanted to harm me" (v. 24). The KJV has the identical "that seek my hurt" in both verses, and the HCSB has the identical "those who seek my harm" in both verses. In this psalm, the phrase signals that the fulcrum of the psalm is at the end of verse 13.

How should we divide the psalm? Consider these suggestions:

Perowne[64]	1–3, 4–13, 14–24
Ross[65]	1–3, 4–13, 14–24

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[62] *Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979).

[63] Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 410.

[64] Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 1:558.

[65] Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 2:516.

Goldingay[66]	1–8, 9–16, 17–24
Wilson[67]	1–4, 5–9, 10–13, 14–24
Delitzsch[68]	1–6, 7–12, 13–18, 19–24
Lawson[69]	1–8, 9–13, 14–21, 22–24
Phillips[70]	1–6, 7–13, 14–16, 17–24
Cohen[71]	1–3, 4–13, 14–16, 17–20, 21–24
Tate[72]	1–4, 5–12, 13–18, 19–20, 21–24
Bratcher & Reyburn[73]	1–6, 7–11, 12–13, 14–16, 17–24
Kidner[74]	1–3, 3–6, 7–11, 12–16, 17–21, 22–24
Kirkpatrick[75]	1–3, 4–8, 9–13, 14–16, 17–20, 21–24
VanGemeren[76]	1–4, 5–8, 9–13, 14–18, 19–21, 22–24
Williams[77]	1–8, 9–11, 12–13, 14–16, 17–18, 19–21, 22–24

Significantly, except for Goldingay, Delitzsch, Tate, and Kidner, all recognize a break after verse 13. Other than that, however, the sources vary widely from one another in how to divide the psalm. Yet, the ability of these writers in the Hebrew language is significant; so, once again, knowing Hebrew does not bring unanimity. I suggest that a potential reason for this diversity is the emotional impact the psalm had on each commentator.

This psalm is an individual lament. The psalmist laments his aging situation, and all the distresses that come with it. My sermon outline on the psalm follows the emphasis which the fulcrum presents, and divides the psalm into only two major sections. I see the theme (the big idea) as being the confidence that God is faithful—regardless of my age. My propositional statement is: Psalm 71 emotionally connects with us concerning two ways to respond to our faithful God in old age (and even young people are getting older). Some of the emotional upheavals that come with age

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[66] John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 367–77.

[67] Gerald H. Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms*, gen. ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1:968–75.

[68] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms,* 288–96.

[69] Steven J. Lawson, *Holman Old Testament Commentary: Psalms 1–75*, gen. ed. Max Anders (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 351–57.

[70] Phillips, *Exploring the Psalms*, 1:582.

[71] A. Cohen, *The Psalms*. Soncino Books of the Bible, ed. A. Cohen (London: Soncino, 1964), 223–26.

[72] Marvin E. Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 51–100*, gen. eds. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 1990), 207–18.

[73] Bratcher and Reyburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*, 610.

[74] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, gen. ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: Inter–Varsity, 1973), 250–53.

[75] Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 410–15.

[76] VanGemeren, "Psalms," 463–68.

[77] Donald Williams, *Psalms 1–72*, Mastering the Old Testament, gen. ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Dallas: Word, 1986), 478.

are indicated in the psalm: shame from loss of dignity (v. 1), vulnerability (v. 4), need to be sustained (v. 6), failing strength (v. 9), possible impending death (vv. 10–11), inability to defend self (vv. 12–13), being forsaken (v. 18), suffering troubles and distress (v. 20), loss of honor (v. 21). My outline, and some comments about the distresses that come with age, follows. Seek to enter into the emotions of the psalmist.

I.   We Should Respond in Prayer to Our Faithful God During Trials of Old Age (71:1–13).

    A.   We must recognize what the foundations of prayer are (71:1–6).

        1.   We have the foundation of who God is (71:1–3).

            —No matter how much shame may come upon me because of advancing age and its infirmities, God is still my refuge.

        2.   We have the foundation of what God does (71:4–6).

            a.   He rescues (71:4–5a).

            —Declining strength in old age makes me vulnerable.

            b.   He gives confidence (71:5b).

            c.   He superintends life (71:6).

            —Just as God sustained me in birth (when I was totally vulnerable), so He can sustain me in old age, when I'm vulnerable again.

    B.   We must accept the reasons for prayer (71:7–13).

        1.   We suffer the reason of weakening strength (71:7–11).

            a.   Our weakness is perceived (71:7–8).

            b.   Our weakness is real (71:9–11).

            —People may push me aside when old age comes; enemies may come after me in my declining strength and ability; I cry out for God's help in my weakness and impending death.

        2.   We admit the reason of immediate need (7:12–13).

a.   We need God's presence (71:12).

b.   We need personal vindication (71:13).

—The declining strength of old age makes it difficult to defend myself against my adversaries; I desperately need God's help.

FULCRUM: At the end of verse 13; from prayer we move to praise.

II.   We Should Respond in Praise to Our Faithful God for Triumph in Old Age (71:14–24).

A.   We can be confident in praising God (71:14–16).

1.   We have the basis of praise—hope (71:14a).

2.   We enjoy the extent of praise (71:14b–16).

a.   We tell of His righteousness.

b.   We tell of His salvation.

c.   We tell of His mighty deeds.

—A great benefit of old age is that I have seen God's wondrous works over the span of decades and through generations. I can better praise Him because of this.

B.   We can make a commitment to praise God (71:17–21).

1.   We know when to praise (71:17–18).

a.   We praise Him <u>from</u> the time of <u>our</u> youth (71:17).

—God taught me from my youth to praise Him, and now that I am old I must not cease doing it.

b.   We praise Him <u>to</u> the contemporary youth (71:18).

—I am old and gray, my strength and vitality diminishes; has God forgotten me? No, I can still declare God's praise to the younger generations.

2.   We know why to praise (71:19–21).

        a.   We praise Him because of His character (71:19).

        b.   We praise Him because of His consistency (71:20).

—Even though I recognize that many of my troubles and distresses come with God's direct permission, still I know He will revive me and comfort me.

        c.   We praise Him because of His care (71:21).

C.   We can be continuous in praising God (71:22–24).

    1.   We can praise Him with musical instruments (71:22).

    2.   We can praise Him with our voices (71:23–24).

—My strength diminishes in old age, death is impending, troubles abound, the enemies are strong, but as long as I have breath to speak I praise my God for His redemption. He is on my side and will bring me ultimate vindication in His righteousness.

Conclusion

The Old Testament Book of Psalms is a favorite among God's people, including scholars, preachers, and the laity. Throughout the centuries, believers have looked to the Psalms for encouragement, for comfort, for challenge, and for stimulation. Preachers need not hesitate to study them nor to preach them.

One way to minimize the struggle over how best to present the message of a psalm is to broaden our study beyond the analytical. We should definitely continue our structural analysis, but must coordinate that with an emotional understanding of the psalm. Indeed, the intended emotional subjectivity of poetry makes a rigid structural analysis less important than in some other genres of literature. Approaching the Psalms with this recognition will greatly assist expositors in understanding them and communicating them effectively to an audience.