

Suggestions for Psalm Study

Adapted from How to Read the Psalms by Tremper Longman III. His chapter titles are in bold.

The Genres of the Psalms

1. Consciously make a decision about the genre of a passage of Scripture as you read it.
2. Be flexible in your understanding of the text's genre. More than one category may be applicable.
3. While reading a hymn, look for the word *for* or *because*. Here we usually can find the reason for praise.
4. As you study a hymn, list the psalmist's reasons for praise.
5. In a lament, identify the object of the psalmist's complaint. Does he focus on himself, his enemies or God?
6. Examine the structure of a lament for the presence of the seven "building blocks" (invocation, plea, complaint, expression of confidence, confession of sin or assertion of innocence, imprecation, hymn or blessing) which often occur in laments.
7. Study a lament carefully to determine whether it is the cry of an individual or the community.
8. Once you've identified a thanksgiving psalm, try to understand the prayer (usually a quoted lament) which has been answered.
9. In a psalm of confidence, identify the factors which threaten the psalmist's well-being.
10. Identify the images of God which the psalmist uses to communicate his confidence in God as he faces trouble.
11. A psalm of remembrance is one in which the mighty acts of God are recounted. As you read a remembrance psalm, list the mighty acts of God and read about these events in the historical books of the Bible.
12. Since there is a strong connection between the wisdom books and the Psalms, ask yourself if wisdom themes—like creation order, law, the contrast between the righteous and the wicked—are present in the psalm which you are studying.
13. Examine a psalm to see if the king is speaking the prayer or is the object of prayer.

The Origin, Development and Use of the Psalms

14. Let the psalm title initially inform the reading of the a psalm.
15. Don't bend the interpretation of a psalm unnaturally to make it conform to the title.
16. Examine the last verses of a psalm to see if there is any evidence that the psalm has been "updated."

The Psalms: The Heart of the Old Testament

17. Study the theological teaching of the psalm. What is the psalm communicating about God and his covenant relationship to his people?

A Christian Reading of the Psalms

18. After interpreting a psalm according to its Old Testament context, consider how the psalm anticipates the coming of Jesus Christ. Ask how the song may be sung to Jesus.

The Psalms: Mirror of the Soul

19. As you read a psalm, explore the psalmist's emotional expression.
20. Ask yourself: How can I learn from the psalmist's example?

Old Testament Poetry: Understanding Parallelism

21. Read the psalm slowly. Examine the relationships between the lines for similarities and differences.
22. On the basis of these similarities and differences, divide the lines into phrases.
23. When reading a poetic line, ask how the second phrase carries forward the thought of the first.
24. Don't force the similarities. Not every phrase in a poem will be parallel with another. Some will be more parallel than others.
25. The six categories of parallelism (synonymous, antithetic, emblematic, repetitive, pivot and chiasm) are *rough* guides to discovering the relationship between the two (or occasionally three) phrases of a poetic line.

Imagery in the Psalms

26. Be aware that an image is likely to exist when it is impossible or absurd to interpret a word, sentence or section literally.
27. While reading a psalm, be sensitive to imagery. Imagery compares one thing to another. If the comparison is explicit (*like* or *as*), then the image is a simile. If the comparison is implicit, then the image is a metaphor.
28. When interpreting an image, identify the comparison which is being made.
29. Think seriously about the comparison. In what ways are the two things alike and in what ways are they different?
30. Be aware that the imagery of the Psalter comes from the culture of ancient Israel and not the modern West.
31. Images may come from non-Israelite religions. But when they do, they are adapted for a very specific purpose. The use of such images is polemical. That is, they communicated to pagans and probably more directly to apostate Israelites that they were worshipping the wrong god. The power was with Israel's God.
32. Have a study Bible and/or some good commentaries handy. Refer to them *after* having thought about the meaning of the psalm.