

A Call to Praise God (K. Barker)

Introduction to the Genre of Praise

“It is good to praise the LORD.” (1) So wrote the psalmist in Psalm 92:1. But how should God’s people praise Him? David and the other psalmists would respond: by recalling God’s marvelous attributes and reporting the ways in which He manifests, reveals, and expresses those general attributes to His people through His specific, mighty, redemptive acts for them.

Such an understanding of the nature and quality of praise in the Psalms is different from that of the past. The main traditional approach to classifying the psalms was to divide them into somewhat artificial and sometimes arbitrary categories based on the primary subject or theme of each psalm. It was, then, essentially a topical approach based on a study of the contents of each psalm. Thus individual psalms were labeled as instruction, trust, praise, distress and sorrow, thanksgiving, aspiration, penitence, history, imprecation, meditation, intercession, prophecy, etc.

The German scholar, Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), changed all that. (2) He was a true pioneer in Psalms studies and marked a new point of departure by focusing on “types” (Gattungen) of psalms according to their function, form (or structure), and “life setting” (Sitz im Leben), that is, the kind of situation that produced each psalm, or for which each was composed, or on which each was used. This was a quite revolutionary approach and has greatly affected and tremendously influenced all studies in the Psalms ever since. Johnson goes so far as to say that whatever progress has been made in the study of the Psalter since World War I is largely due to the influence of one man, Gunkel. (3) Consequently all study of the Psalms may be divided into pre- and post-Gunkel phases. There has been no worthwhile Psalms commentary since his that has not built on the approach he developed. (4)

What is Praise?

Claus Westermann’s work provides some significant insights into the nature and quality of true praise. Based on usage in the Psalms, praise is seen primarily as reciting the attributes of God (Westermann’s “descriptive” praise) and the acts of God (Westermann’s “declarative” praise), then praising God for both. The worshiper thus rejoices in the fact that God is the kind of God He is and that He does the things that He does. This, in turn, promotes greater trust in God, as well as a thankful heart.

Westermann observes that the Song of Miriam and the Song of Deborah show the unmistakable clarity that the Sitz-im-Leben (life-setting) of the hymn of praise is the experience of God’s intervention in history. God has acted; he has helped his people; now praise must be sung to him. (5)

What Kinds of Praise Psalms are there?

Praising God for Who He Is (Descriptive Praise)

There are two kinds of praise: descriptive and declarative. Originally psalms of descriptive praise were intended to be used either chorally or perhaps as a solo in the normal round of public or national worship. They are frequently called hymns of praise. The reason Westermann uses the term *descriptive* is that in this category the psalmist is praising God basically by describing His character. Here the focus is on the attributes of God – who He is and what He is like. The most common Hebrew verb used for this kind of praise is *hillel*. English readers are familiar with it in its imperative form: Hallelu-Jah (or Yah), “Praise Yah (short for Yahweh [the LORD])!” There are five main sub-categories of this type of praise (a partial list of psalms belonging to each sub-category follows its label):

1. Hymns Proper: Psalms 24, 29, 33, 100, 103, 105, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150

Some restrict descriptive praise to this first sub-category, but the following four types also seem to be more specialized sub-categories of descriptive praise.

2. Enthronement Psalms: Psalms 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99

The expression “the LORD reigns” or “will reign” is characteristic of enthronement psalms. Actually they are probably best labeled theocratic psalms, that is, psalms that celebrate the Lord’s universal and eternal rule. All passages that speak of a future coming of the Lord to His people or to the earth, or that speak of a future rule of the Lord over Israel or over the whole earth, are also ultimately Messianic – indirectly or by extension – for to be fully and literally true, they require a future, literal Messianic kingdom on the earth. (6)

3. Songs of Zion (including Pilgrim Psalms): Psalms 48, 84, 87, 120, 121, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134

Psalms 120-34 are also known as Songs of Ascent. Such psalms were probably sung by the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem (and on their arrival there) to celebrate the three annual festivals (Deut 16:16).

4. Royal Psalms: Psalms 2, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144

Here praise is given to the heavenly King for the earthly king. In the period of the monarchy, the reigning king was regarded as being in an intimate relationship with the Lord and thus as one who played a leading role in Israel’s worship. Outstanding events in the life of such a king should be recalled as possible settings for psalms clearly concerned with a royal figure – events such as the anniversary of the founding of the Davidic dynasty and its royal sanctuary on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, a king’s enthronement or the anniversary of his enthronement, a royal wedding, the period just before the king departed for battle, and the celebration of his victorious return.

Such psalms are also called Messianic psalms. We have already referred to the enthronement psalms (for which our preferred label is theocratic psalms) as examples of indirect Messianic prophecy (or Messianic prophecy by extension from God in general to the Messiah in particular). Other categories of Messianic prophecy include direct, typical (or typological), and typical – prophetic. Probably most evangelical scholars would classify Psalm 110 as directly Messianic. Most of the other royal psalms listed above would be classified as typically Messianic, in the sense that most (if not all) of the historical kings in the Davidic dynasty function as types of the ultimate Son of David in some capacity. A few other psalms would be classified as typically – prophetically Messianic, such as Psalms 2. Here the language at times so transcends the experience of the psalmist, and even stretches hyperbole, to the point that it becomes more directly prophetic of the antitype, the Messiah.

5. Creation Psalms: Psalms 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 19, 104

Psalm 19 is a mixed type, with verses 7-14 being more like a Torah (or wisdom or didactic) psalm.

The Structure of Descriptive Praise

Psalms of descriptive praise (or hymns of praise) have three main parts (7):

1. Call to Praise (Introduction)

The imperative call to praise is sometimes replaced by a reflection on praise.

2. Cause for Praise (Main Section)

The reason for praise is often introduced by “for.”

3. Conclusion to Praise (Recapitulation)

Frequently this type of psalm concludes with a renewed call to praise, echoing the note struck at the beginning.

The structure of descriptive praise is beautifully illustrated in Psalm 33: (1) Call to Praise (vv. 1-3); (2) Cause for Praise (vv. 4-19; note the “For” at the beginning of v. 4); (3) Conclusion to Praise (vv. 20-22).

Praising god for What He Has Done (Declarative Praise)

Here the psalmist has been in dire need and has prayed to God for deliverance, and God has intervened by granting the psalmist an answer – a specific act of deliverance. Now, in front of the entire assembly, the psalmist voices thanksgiving to God by declaring what God has done (usually also presenting a public thank offering to God).

Such psalms are often called songs of thanksgiving. The reason Westermann uses the term *declarative* is that in this category the psalmist is praising God primarily by publicly declaring His mighty deeds. Here the emphasis is on the acts of God – what He has done and given (or provided). The most frequently used Hebrew verb for this kind of praise is *hodah* (from the root *yadah*). Many English readers are familiar with it in the form *todah*, a modern Hebrew way of saying “Thank you.” There are two sub-categories of this type of praise, depending on whether the thanksgiving is by an individual or the whole community (a partial list of Psalms belonging to each sub-category follows its label):

1. Psalms of Individual Thanksgiving: Psalms 18 (2 Sam 22), 30, 34, 40:1-10 (mixed type), 66:13-20 (mixed type), 92, 116, 118, 121, 138, Jonah 2
2. Psalms of Community Thanksgiving: Psalms 46, 65, 66:1-12 (mixed type), 67, 107, 124

Occasionally descriptive praise and declarative praise are found in the same psalm. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that praise should be neither all descriptive nor all declarative. Rather, it should be *both* descriptive and declarative.

The Structure of Declarative Praise

Sometimes a psalm of declarative praise (or song of thanksgiving) follows the same pattern as that of a psalm of descriptive praise. When it does, one must decide whether it is descriptive praise or declarative praise by the emphasis of the contents. Is the psalm more general, stressing the attributes of God? Then it is descriptive. Is it more specific, focusing on the acts of God? Then it is declarative.

Psalms of declarative praise have three main parts (8):

1. Introduction

Here the worshiper announces his intention to give thanks to God, or he simply announces what God has done.

2. Main Section: A Narration of the Individual's Experience

The section typically includes a portrayal of the distress the psalmist was in, his cry to God for help, and his deliverance.

3. Conclusion

The worshiper again testifies to the Lord's gracious act of deliverance. A prayer for future help, or a confession that the Lord is gracious, or some other formulation may be added.

For an example, see the article "Declaring praise in the Belly of a fish (K. Barker)".

Praise in the Ancient Near Eastern World

In the Babylonian psalms the praise of God is almost exclusively descriptive. Praise based on the mighty acts of God, that is, declarative praise, is only represented meagerly. The Babylonian psalms primarily praise "the god who exists in his world of gods. In Israel (the psalms or hymns) primarily praise the God who acts marvelously by intervening in the history of his people and in the history of the individual member of his people." (9) In Egypt the situation is similar: While there is some declarative praise in the Egyptian psalms or hymns, it occurs very sporadically there as well.

A sample of descriptive praise in the Akkadian language is this translation of part of the Babylonian hymn of praise to the sun-god, Shamash:

Your splendor covers the vast mountains,
Your fierce light fills the lands to their limits.
You climb to the mountains surveying the earth,
You suspend from the heavens the circle of the lands.
You care for all the peoples of the lands,
And everything that Ea, king of the counselors, had created is entrusted to you.
Whatever has breath you shepherd without exception,
You are their keeper in upper and lower regions.
Regularly and without cease you traverse the heavens,
Every day you pass over the broad earth. (10)

A sample of descriptive praise in Egyptian literature is this translation of part of Pharaoh Akhenaten's hymn of praise to the Aten (the sun disk as the source of life):

When thou settest in the western horizon,
The land is in darkness, in the manner of death.
They sleep in a room, with heads wrapped up,
Nor sees one eye the other ...

At daybreak, when thou arisest on the horizon,
When thou shinest as the Aton by day,
Thou drivest away the darkness and givest thy rays...

How manifold it is, what thou hast made!

They are hidden from the face (of man).

O sole god, like whom there is no other!

Thou didst create the world according to thy desire. (11)

While there are some undeniable parallels or similarities between these hymns and the psalms of descriptive praise in the Old Testament, there are even more remarkable differences. One must therefore be very careful not to conclude too hastily that one depended on, or borrowed from, the other.

Israel's religion is quite different from those all around them. Indeed it is unique in the ancient Near Eastern world. One thing is clear: The Israelites believed that Yahweh, their God, had defeated Pharaoh and Egypt's gods through the plagues and the exodus (Ex 12:12; 14:17-18, 30-31; 15:11). So there is polemical value in comparative studies.

Many scholars have demonstrated that while there is much to learn of a positive nature from the study of parallels between Biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature, one must proceed with due caution and with a balanced approach. So it is with the study of praise literature in the Bible and the ancient Near Eastern world. While there are numerous instructive parallels (though more in form than in content), there are even more significant differences. For example, why is declarative praise comparatively rare in the ancient Near East? The qualification "comparatively rare" is used because pagan peoples did sometimes acknowledge the help of their god(s) in war chronicles. Still those immersed in mythology, polytheism, and idolatry apparently could not attribute very many divine interventions to their (false) gods in their hymnic literature. They had few "mighty acts" to celebrate, particularly in their hymns of praise. From the perspective of Old Testament theology, the reason for inaction by the other so-called gods is stated in such Scripture passages as the following:

I, even I, am the LORD,
and apart from me there is no savior.

I have revealed and save and proclaimed –
I, and not some foreign god among you. (Isa 43:11-12)

Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain?
Do the skies themselves send down showers?

No, it is you, O LORD our God.
Therefore our hope is in you,
for you are the one who does all this. (Jer 14:22)

... no other god can save this way. (Dan 3:29)

Isaiah repeatedly mentions the worthlessness and impotence of the pagan idols that represented false gods (e.g. Isa 30:6-7; 44:10; 45:20; 46:7).

All such passages obviously function as polemic thrusts against competing religious beliefs. (12)

Guidelines for Interpreting and Using Praise Literature

In addition to the usual hermeneutical (interpretative) principles used in the study of all other literature, there are some special interpretative principles that must be applied in analyzing praise literature. They are as follows:

1. Since the praise genre is part of Hebrew poetry, make allowance for Hebrew poetic features. One such feature is semantic, as well as grammatical, parallelism. Parallelism may be defined as thoughts (or grammatical elements) arranged in a certain formal relationship to each other. The three most common kinds of parallelism are synonymous, antithetical, and synthetical. In synonymous parallelism one or more poetic lines not only repeat the basic idea of the first line in different words but also stress, intensify, or refine the thought in some way. Psalms 19:1 provides an example:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of His hands.

The heavens or skies bring glory to God in that they are the work of His hands. In antithetical parallelism one thought is contrasted with another. A sample is found in Proverbs 15:1:

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

In synthetical parallelism the thought is further extended, developed, supplemented, complemented, or completed. Psalms 3:4 illustrates it:

To the LORD I cry aloud,
and He answers me from His holy hill.

While the definitions of synonymous, antithetical, and synthetical parallelism have been refined over the many years, they are still valid forms of parallelism. (13) In fact, paying adequate attention to parallelism is important because it can help one avoid certain mistakes in interpretation. For example, in Psalms 30:3 the synonymously parallel line “you spared me from going down into the pit” prevents one from understanding the first line “O LORD, you brought me up from the grave” to mean that David had actually died and had been buried in the grave. Rather, “grave” (Hebrew *Sheol*) is a hyperbole (an exaggeration) to depict forcefully a near – death experience. We might put it: “I was as good as dead.” David is thanking God for delivering him from death and the grave.

2. After parallelism, another common characteristic of Hebrew poetry (and so of praise literature) is figurative language. Obviously, such figures of speech as simile (e.g. Ps 1:3: “He is like a tree”), metaphor (e.g. Ps 84:11: “For the LORD God is a sun and shield”), metonymy (e.g. Ps 139:5: “You have laid your hand [= power and / or control] upon me”), synecdoche (e.g. Ps 3:3: “You lift up my head [= me]”), hyperbole (see above and below), and personification (e.g. Ps 77:16: “The waters saw you, O God”) should not be understood literally. (14) For instance, metaphors such as king, shepherd, and rock are used in praise of God. Clearly, in that context, such metaphors are not to be understood literally but in the sense of what they symbolize.

3. Where it is possible to do so, try to discover the historical occasion for the particular psalm being studied. As already mentioned, this is commonly known as the psalm's *Sitz im Leben*, that is, the specific situation in the life of the individual or of the people that produced the psalm. To discover such a historical context, make use of the psalm – type and its form (or structure) and contents. Where they exist, the psalm titles, headings, or superscriptions are often helpful for reconstructing the historical background. Unfortunately, most psalms have no historical notion (only three of the praise psalms have such superscriptions, namely 18, 30, and 34). And the content of many psalms is frequently too general to use in determining the occasion. So it is better to admit ignorance of the specific historical setting than to arbitrarily assign a particular historical “setting in life” when there is not adequate evidence to justify such a reconstruction.

4. Determine the psalm's type (*Gattung*), that is, whether it features descriptive praise or declarative praise and whether the praise is by an individual or the people as a whole. Then interpret accordingly. For example, Psalms 33 (see above) is classified as a psalm of descriptive praise (or hymn of praise), not as a psalm of declarative praise (or song of thanksgiving) by an individual. This means that it is a psalm for public worship. So it should be expounded in view of that fact. Here it must be remembered that “I” in certain psalms is occasionally collective, representing the people instead of an individual.

5. For a legitimate devotional use of spiritual application of praise literature, formulate timeless general spiritual principles that are valid and applicable at all time periods to all people in the same, or in a similar, situation. Of course, descriptive praise of God is inherently timeless and can be used by any true worshiper. Declarative praise of God can be used by those in the psalmist's situation or in a similar situation. In addition, new songs of thanksgiving (declarative praise) can be composed by those who experience their own answers to prayer and divine deliverances. (15)

Indeed, because God's new mighty acts, such as His redemptive acts through Christ, call for new songs of thanksgiving, it is not surprising to find such declarative praise in the New Testament (for example, Mary's song, the Magnificat, in Luke 1:46-55 and Zechariah's song, the Benedictus, in Luke 1:68-75). Even in modern times, we are encouraged to continue the practice of praise and thanksgiving by Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:15-17.

What bearing should all this have on church hymnology today? The church's music should focus primarily on (1) putting the psalms of the Old Testament to music, (2) praising the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) for all that they are and for what they are like (descriptive praise), and (3) thanking the Trinity (three divine persons) for all that they do, give and provide (declarative praise). The songs of thanksgiving are basically testimony songs, but the focus must always be on what the Lord has done and on the fact that He has done it. Church hymns (as well as praise and worship songs and choruses) may also include prayers, songs of trust, and instruction (in wisdom and in God's Word), but those subjects for a later time.

Conclusion

Some of the most important points about the genre of praise that interpreters should keep in mind are: (1) God is to be praised by recalling and meditating on His marvelous attributes (love, grace, faithfulness, holiness, righteousness, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, etc.) – descriptive praise for who He is and what He is like. (2) He is also to be praised by reporting divine interventions and answers to prayer through His specific, mighty acts of deliverance – declarative praise for what He has done and provided. (3) The principal kinds of descriptive praise to look for are hymns proper, enthronement (or theocratic) psalms, songs of Zion (including pilgrim psalms and songs of ascent), royal psalms, and creation psalms. (4) The major kinds of declarative praise to discover are individual thanksgiving and community thanksgiving. (5) While there are similarities between praise in the Old Testament and praise in the ancient Near East, there are also significant differences. For example, there is much more declarative praise to the Lord in Israel's hymns than in the hymns to the gods of the surrounding pagan countries. One should even look in Israel's praise literature for polemic thrusts against competing religious beliefs.

Interpretative principles for the praise genre should include: (1) Pay attention to the kind of poetic parallelism involved. (2) Make allowance for figures of speech, which are not to be understood literally. (3) Where possible, discover the historical occasion or "life-setting" (Sitz im Leben) of a particular psalm being studied, and interpret it in view of that background. (4) Determine whether a praise psalm's type (Gattung) is descriptive praise or declarative praise and whether the praise is by an individual or the community. (5) Formulate timeless general spiritual principles that are applicable today to people in the same, or in a similar, situation.

Perhaps a personal testimony about how our Lord has used praise and thanksgiving to enrich my own spiritual life would be an appropriate concluding application. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and have difficulty falling asleep again. Rather than become frustrated, one of the things I often do is meditate on God's marvelous attributes and how He has graciously expressed those traits to me and my family through His mighty, saving acts. This is a form of descriptive and declarative praise. It is an immensely profitable spiritual exercise. I highly recommend it to others. Certainly now more than ever, with the coming of the Christ and His redemptive acts, we Christians have even more reason to praise and thank God for the person and work of His Son and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

"On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night" (Ps 63:6).

"My eyes stay open through the watches of the night,
that I may meditate on your promises" (Ps 119:148).

"Glorify the LORD with me;
let us exalt His name together" (Ps 34:3).

May we say yes to the Lord's call to thus praise and thank Him.

References:

1. All translations are from the NIV.
2. See his *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, tr. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).
3. A.R. Johnson, "The Psalms," in *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, ed. H.H. Rowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), p. 162.
4. John Bright, "Modern Study of Old Testament Literature," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. G. Ernest Wright (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 26-27. Also influential in the study of the Psalms is Sigmund Mowinckel, a Norwegian scholar who stresses the cultic character of the Psalms even more than Gunkel (see Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, tr. D.R. Ap-Thomas [Nashville: Abingdon, 1962]). Mowinckel also makes much of psalms containing references to the so-called enthronement of Yahweh as King. He connects this with an alleged Jewish festival of the New Year, analogous to that in Babylon honoring the god Marduk. (In the Akkadian language, the Babylonian New Year festival is called *akitu*.) For cogent arguments against Mowinckel's view, see K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity, 1966), pp. 102-06.
5. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, tr. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlantic: John Knox, 1981), p.22.
6. Kenneth L. Barker, "Zechariah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, general ed. Frank Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:619.
7. See Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), pp. 100-1; cf. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, pp. 122 ff. and chart on pp. 156-57.
8. See Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, pp. 84-86; cf. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, charts on pp. 85-86, 103-4.
9. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, p. 42.

10. W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), p. 127, lines 17-28.

11. John A. Wilson, "Egyptian Hymns and Prayers," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 370.

12. For further development of such a polemic purpose in many parts of the Old Testament, see my article, "The Value of Ugaritic for Old Testament Studies," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 (April-June, 1976): 120-23; cf. now Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "The Polemic against Baalism in Israel's Early History and Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (July-September 1994): 267-83.

13. See John H. Stek, "When the Spirit Was Poetic," in *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 72-87, 158-61; cf. also Stek's Introduction to the Psalms in *The NIV Study Bible*, general ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), particularly pp. 783-84.

14. Cf. Herbert M. Wolf, "When 'Literal' Is Not Accurate," in *The NIV: The Making*, especially pp. 134-36; E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968 reprint of 1898 edition).

15. See William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993). Altogether, they list eight principles for interpreting poetry (pp. 290-91).