

## *Psalms: Exegetical Observations*

### **The Psalms as Poetry**

- The most important thing to remember in reading or interpreting the psalms is that they are poetry
  - Often set to music
- Hebrew poetry does not rhyme phonetically like English poetry often does
  - Instead it ‘rhymes’ ideas using a form called parallelism
  - There are 3 main types of parallelism
    - Synonymous Parallelism: “A form where the second and subsequent lines repeat or reinforce the sense of the first line” (ex. Ps. 19:1)
    - Antithetical Parallelism: “A form where the second and subsequent lines contrasts the thought of the first line, often reinforcing the first line by the contrast” (ex. Ps. 73:26)
    - Synthetic Parallelism: “A form where the second and subsequent lines add to the first line in any manner that provides further information” (ex. Ps. 24:4)
  - The alignment of parallelism is not always direct
    - Chiasmic Parallelism: “When lines have parts that correspond, but in reversed order” (ex. Ps. 124:7)
- There are 3 additional points that will help in understanding the Psalter
  1. Hebrew poetry, by its very nature, was addressed to the mind through the emotions
    - Thus, we need to be careful NOT to ‘over-exegete’ a passage
      - Over-exegete: “Looking for special meanings in specific words or phrases where the author intended none”
    - Remember, parallelism is at the heart of how Hebrew poetry ‘rhymes’
      - Especially true in synonymous parallelism, where the 2<sup>nd</sup> line repeats the idea of the first, and thus the meaning is the same, even if the words are different
        - Ex.) In Ps. 19:1-2, each line says the same thing in different ways
  2. The psalms themselves are musical poems
    - As they invoke emotion, they are meant to go beyond a mere cognitive recognition of doctrinal facts
    - They contain and reflect doctrine, but are NOT meant to be repositories of doctrinal exposition
      - Thus it is dangerous to read them as teaching a system of doctrines
        - Just like with narrative texts
    - Ex.) Ps. 51:5 "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”
      - The psalmist is not trying to establish a doctrine that conception is inherently sinful or even original sin in unborn children
      - Rather, he is using hyperbole in order to strongly and vividly express that he is a sinner with a long history of sinful activity
        - Hyperbole: “Purposeful exaggeration”
    - Psalms are poetry, not theology

- We should never get our theology from the Psalms *alone*
  - They may utilize theological principles taught elsewhere in Scripture
  - But their purpose is NOT to introduce theology
3. The vocabulary of poetry is purposefully metaphorical
- Thus, one must look for the intent of the metaphor
    - Understanding what it means to convey
    - Not imbuing other meanings into the text
    - Not pressing the metaphors or taking them literally

### **The Psalms as Literature**

- As poetry, psalms are also a form of literature with certain distinctive features
1. Psalms are of several different types
  2. Each psalm is also characterized by its formal structure
  3. Each type of psalm was intended to have a given function in the life of Israel
  4. There are various patterns within the psalms, at times including:
    - Certain arrangements or repetitions of words and sounds
    - Acrostics: where each line or section begins with the sequential letters of the Hebrew alphabet (see Ps. 119)
  5. Each psalm has its own integrity as literary unit
    - They should be read as wholes
    - Not broken apart into individual verses, which leads to decontextualizing (see Fee p. 217.5-218.1)
    - Learn to follow the flow and balance of each psalm, which has a pattern of development by which its ideas are presented, developed, and brought to some conclusion