

The fifth book of the Psalter

Psalms 107 - 150

Some of our forefathers believed in reading/singing the psalms in order. Today, when the psalms are even used at all, they tend to be used randomly, though sometimes tied to a church calendar or to the pastor's sermon. The Bible does not bind us to any particular practice, but there is a good reason to consider the order of the psalms as God had them placed in the psalter. That order is itself part of the canon, an aspect of the divine word of Holy Scripture.

My purpose in this brief essay is to consider the narrative progression in the fifth book of the psalter, psalms 107-150. We shall see that there is a very good reason why the psalms fall in the order they do, and from this we can uncover the overall story and message of the fifth book of the psalms.

In brief, the order is this: God delivers us, and we praise Him. Then He gives us His law. We respond by going up to Jerusalem for praise. But then we find we are in exile. How can we praise Him in exile, when we can no longer ascend to Jerusalem? The wonderful answer is given, and then we praise Him even more, bringing the book to a close.

I. Exodus

Psalm 107

Psalm 107 provides a general picture of God's gathering His people from all over the world and from many circumstances. It is a greater, more comprehensive exodus than the one from Egypt that is displayed.

First, God delivers from the east (vv. 4-9), from the wilderness where the people wander. This alludes to the original exodus.

Second, God delivers from the west (vv. 10-16), from bondage and iron, gloom and chains. This alludes to the Philistine bondage, and to Samson.

Third, God delivers from the north (vv. 17-22), from those near death. I submit that this probably refers to the return from Assyrian and Babylonian exile.

Fourth, God delivers from the sea (vv. 23-32) – not, n.b., from the south. The reference is to Gentiles, and the allusion is to the book of Jonah.

These four exoduses allude to the four periods of Biblical history: the Moses/Law period, the Kingdom period, the Restoration period, and the New Covenant period. The psalm concludes with a statement that after exodus comes settlement, judgment, and restoration.

Note: The hallelujah at the end of psalm 106 probably should be at the beginning of psalm 107, so that the fifth book of the psalter both begins and ends with this exclamation. There are, besides 107, fifteen hallelujah psalms in the fifth book.

II. Conquest, Judgment, and Restoration

Psalms 108-110

The next three psalms are taken from those written by David. Psalm 108 celebrates the notion of conquest, as those delivered from "Egypt" conquer and settle God's land. Psalm 109 picks up the next theme from the last part of psalm 107, and is a prayer for God to deliver from oppression. Finally, psalm 110 celebrates God's gift of a messianic King over the people, the restoration from judgment.

Psalm 72:20 says that the psalms of David are completed at that point. This indicates that originally these later Davidic psalms were part of an earlier collection. They were removed to this place under divine guidance to form part of the narrative of the fifth book of psalms.

III. Praise for Deliverance

Psalms 111-118

Liturgically, a season of praise comes after our sins are declared forgiven and we are declared members of the kingdom of God. In the same way, we next find eight psalms of praise, which reflect thematically on the

exodus, conquest, and enthronement. Structurally, the first four psalms (111-114) begin with Hallelu-Yah, while the last four (115-118) end with it. (In some versions, the hallelujah of psalm 114 has been moved to the end of 113.)

Psalms 111-112 are set apart from the other six hallelujah psalms in that they are both alphabetical acrostic psalms: Each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in succession, forming two 22-line alphabets of praise.

Psalms 118 ends with a call to come to the Temple and worship, a call that is answered in psalms 120ff. But first we have a celebration of the Law.

IV. The Law

Psalms 119

Delivered from Egypt, we have praised God at the Red Sea after seeing our enemies overthrown. Now we arrive at Mount Sinai, where God graciously give us His wonderful law. Psalm 119 is an alphabet of praise for the Law, the Word of God. Each of the 22 sections consists of sixteen lines in eight pairs, and in each section each pair begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, following the alphabet in order. We have already seen this, and here it is again.

Full abecedarian, or alphabetically acrostic psalms are only found in the fifth book of psalms. Psalms 25, 34, & 37 are abecedarian, but with slight irregularities, while psalms 9-10 have an abecedarian outline, but with large breaks. I submit that an alphabetical acrostic implies a celebration of the Word of God, or a full word of response to that Word. When we get to psalm 138, I shall suggest why we find such complete abecedarian psalms in book 5.

V. Offertory

Psalms 120-136

In the liturgy, renewed praise and self-offering come after the word and sermon, and so it is here as well. These seventeen psalms are often called the Great Hallel. The first fifteen are the Songs of Ascents, which recount and celebrate the journey up to the Temple for worship. Psalms 135 and 136 are two hallelujah psalms, both of which begin with Hallelu-Yah. (The hallelujah at the beginning of psalm 136 is sometimes printed at the end of 135.)

We recall that after God gave His law to Israel in Exodus 20-24, He then established the Tabernacle and the sacrificial system in Exodus 25-40 and the book of Leviticus. So here, after psalm 119 we ascend to the Temple, and then join in praise. The climax of the

Great Hallel(ujah) is psalm 136, with its refrain, "For His loving-kindness is everlasting."

VI. Crisis (Psalm 137)

But how can we sing Yahweh's praises in a strange land? That is the question posed by psalm 137, a psalm of exile. Everything in book 5 of the psalter has led to this question, and here is the turning point. We are no longer able to make the ascent to Jerusalem, so how can we sing the Songs of Ascents and the Great Hallel? The answer is implied by the psalm, in that the psalm itself is a hymn to God. Yet there is more to the answer than psalm 137 by itself provides.

VII. David Resolves the Crisis

Psalms 138-145

Psalm 138 resolves the crisis by going back to David. We are reminded that even in David's day the Temple was not the full reality of God's presence. God always magnified His Word above His Name. Solomon had pointed out when the Temple was built that God dwells in the heavens, and that only His Name was dwelling in the Temple (1 Kings 8). In exile and dispersion, the people still have God's Word. He will hear them and He will save them.

The Word! Here is, I believe, the reason why we find full alphabetical psalms in book 5 of the psalter. Indeed, the last of these Davidic consolations, psalm 145, is another abecedarian psalm. The stress on Alphabet in psalm 145 matches the stress on Word in psalm 138.

Psalm 139 also resolves the crisis by again going back to David. We are reminded that David knew that, Temple or no Temple, there is no place we can go where God is not present. He watches over us and knows us better than we know ourselves.

These two Davidic psalms are followed by six more, all lifted out of their original context for application to the exiles. If we read these with the exile in mind, we shall see how they fit that situation, just as they originally fitted situations in David's own life.

VIII. Final Hallelujah

Psalms 145-150

Ferocious praise breaks out as the fifth book of the psalter, and the whole psalter itself, comes to an end. Each psalm both begins and ends with Hallelu-Yah. The story is over, and all that remains is praise.

Conclusions

It is likely that book 5 of the psalter was put together during or after the exile. Whoever did it (Ezekiel or Ezra) probably also organized the entire canonical psalter as God intended it to be in its final form. The editor pulled some psalms of David from the earlier collection and placed them strategically in book 5. Other psalms, such as the Songs of Ascents, were also removed from an earlier collection for placement here. Possibly the only new, exilic psalm was psalm 137, though psalm 107 is probably post-exilic as well.

David comes on the scene to remind the exiles that he also had been in exile. They are encouraged to have the same faith he had. Indeed, David is the teacher in book 5. He leads the people in reflections on what it means to be delivered from exile (psalms 108-110). He provides four of the Songs of Ascents (122, 124, 131, 133). He teaches the people how to pray while in exile (psalms 138-145). In all of this, of course, David is a picture of the Messiah.

In all three cases, the liturgical response is praise, hallelujah (111-118, 135-136, 146-150). None of the hallelujah psalms is by David. Thus, there is a dialogue between David's encouragements and the congregation's praise.

Understanding the exilic context of book 5 puts a new perspective on psalm 127, which is by Solomon, and which is the central psalm of the Songs of Ascents. The psalm is an encouragement to the exiles to trust God and not to strive and worry. While they sleep God will rebuild His house (the Temple), His city, and His people (the children).

[Note, this psalm is not directly about individual families; no monogamous marriage can produce a full quiver of arrows, which would be 30-50. Yahweh's family is in view here.]

Psalm 111

Leader: Praise Yah!

Response: Hallelu-Yah!

Aleph is for extolling: I will extol Yahweh with all my heart.

Beth is for in: In the council of the upright and in the congregation.

Gimel is for greatness: Great are the works of Yahweh.

Daleth is for pondering: They are pondered by all who delight in them.

He is for splendor: Splendid and majestic is His work.

Vav is for and: And His righteousness endures forever.

Zayin is for remembering: He causes his wonderful deeds to be remembered.

Heth is for grace: Gracious and compassionate is Yahweh.

Teth is for prey: Prey He provides for those who fear Him.

Yodh points to the future: He will remember His covenant everlastingly.

Kaph is for power: The power of His works He showed to His people.

Lamedh points to purpose: To give to them the heritage of nations.

Mem is for works: The works of His hands are faithful and just.

Nun points to the plural: All His precepts are faithful ones.

Samekh is for sustaining: They are sustained for ever, everlastingly.

Ayin is for doing: They are done in faithfulness and uprightness.

Pe is for redemption: Redemption He provided for His people.

Tsaddeh is for commanding: He commanded His covenant everlastingly.

Qoph is for holiness: Holy and awesome is His name.

Resh is for beginning: Beginning of wisdom: the fear of Yahweh.

Sin is for understanding: A good understanding is for all who follow them.

Tav is for praise: His praise endures for ever.

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