

Psalms Studies: Updating Classifications

Compiled by Bob Young¹

I remember a sermon I heard, focused on the imprecatory (curse) psalms. The challenge of thinking through some apparent “disconnections” sent me back to the Psalms and biblical resources to check recent Psalms studies. Recent studies have altered understandings of the systems of classification for the Psalms. Over at least the past 10-15 years, analysis of the content of the Psalms has yielded new understandings and conclusions.

Hebrew superscriptions suggest to us an ancient system of classification: psalm, shiggaion, miktam, song, maskil, prayer, praise, petition, thanksgiving, teaching, and wedding songs.² In this list, the descriptions of the types are translated when possible, but when meanings are uncertain the Hebrew word is retained. More recently, content analysis has suggested new groupings including individual prayers, community prayers, praise to God (e.g. for his majesty, virtues, and help), songs of confidence in God, celebration of God’s reign, songs of Zion, royal psalms, pilgrimage songs (e.g., the songs of ascent), liturgical songs, and teaching psalms (wisdom). There is often overlap in such groupings, and some psalms may be included in more than one group.

One may note that absent from the list are two types or classifications often included in former studies of the Psalms. It is thought that the penitential psalms (6,32,38,51,102,130,143) were identified as such for liturgical purposes in church history, but that the grouping has no obvious basis in the Psalms as we have them. Likewise, references to the imprecatory psalms (accent on the first syllable, IM-prec-a-tory) have no basis in the Psalms collection. Imprecatory relates to curses (an imprecation is a curse), suggesting that the writer is calling on God to curse the enemy or other opposing person or group. Given the clear teaching of Scripture against those who would curse another, such presents obvious problems of interpretation. The interpretation problem is compounded by the fact that these psalms frequently use literary exaggeration, making them seem especially cruel or vengeful to the contemporary ear. These psalms are better identified as calls for God’s righteousness or justice against evildoers. Given that vengeance belongs to the Lord and is not a right of human beings, such are calls to the one Judge and Lawgiver for judicial redress—calls for God’s divine retribution to those who deserve it. Such psalms are not based in the raw emotion of the writer, but in an awareness of God’s nature relating to justice, righteousness, and doing what is right. These psalms should not be taken as curses (imprecations) pronounced or requested by the writer. They point to the just nature of God, calling on God to intervene in the world to maintain justice. [For a New Testament usage that suggests that God may be unjust (in failing to punish sins committed under the first covenant), see Romans 3:25-26.] These “righteousness psalms” are urging God’s action to maintain justice and to avoid such accusations.

¹ The following is generally redacted from “Introduction: Psalm,” NIV Study Bible (2002).

² Ibid.