in the end, be challenged by Song of Songs, but the image of the “honorable” woman keeping to the inside rooms of the house, remaining invisible in an allegedly male sphere, and passively awaiting male initiative is strongly challenged by the behavior of Ruth and of the “good wife” of Proverbs, whose industry and labor is known and celebrated in the places where men sit.

See also Feminist Interpretation; Social-Scientific Approaches.


HOUSE. See Architecture.

HUMANITY. See Wisdom Theology.

HYMNS

The hymn is a song of praise. Even though the hymn is not the most frequent type of psalm in the book of *Psalms, and even though the noun ṭēḥillā (“song of praise”) occurs in the title of only one psalm (Ps 145), the fact that the ancients named the whole collection of psalms “Praises” (ṭēḥillum) indicates the importance of the hymn for the theology of the book of Psalms (Collins). C. Westermann (1981) was the first to note that while the *lament is more frequent than the hymn, lamentation is more characteristic of the earlier portion of the Psalter, while praise dominates the end (note the recurring “Praise [ḥaalētis] the Lord” at the beginning and end of each of Ps 146—150 and the eleven additional uses of the verb “praise” [ḥalal] in Ps 150). This movement from lamentation to praise articulates the hope of the psalms, a hope that is captured by the language of Psalm 30:5: “Weeping may go on all night, but joy comes in the morning.” The hymn is the quintessential song of praise and captures the heart of Psalms: God’s glory is our destiny.

1. The Place of the Hymn
2. The Praise of the Hymn
3. The Structure of the Hymn
4. The Content of the Hymn
5. The Use of the Hymn

1. The Place of the Hymn.

Scholars agree that the book of Psalms contains three primary genres: the hymn, the lament, and the *thanksgiving psalm. W. Brueggemann has referred to these three as songs of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. By using these labels, Brueggemann articulates something fundamental about how the three primary genres relate to each other and how they relate to the ebb and flow of life.
Hymns were composed for times when all is well. They are songs for those trouble-free times in life, times when life is well ordered, well oriented. Life is not, however, always experienced as well ordered or well oriented. “Disorientation” better describes life at times. The laments were written for situations such as these. The time eventually comes, however, when one looks back at those troublesome days and says to God, “You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy” (Ps 30:11, NLT). The songs of thanksgiving were composed to express joy and gratitude to God for such restoration. Over time the memory of the troublesome days grows dim, life is well ordered once again, and the hymn is sung to celebrate the goodness of God in the goodness of life.

2. The Praise of the Hymn.
Although the praise of God is found in a number of genres, the hymn is the primary vehicle of praise in the book of Psalms (Merrill; see also Westermann 1981). The noun tehillā (“praise”) occurs in the title only of Psalm 145, which itself a hymn.

2.1. Praise as an Exclamation. The book of Psalms uses “Praise the LORD” on a limited basis as an exclamation. The Hebrew expression halēlū yāh (“praise the LORD”), from which the English exclamation “Hallelujah!” is derived, occurs twenty-three times in the book of Psalms and nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. A number of modern translations rightly render this phrase as an exclamation rather than as a command/imperative (contra Merrill and the NIV; see ESV, NAB, NASB, NLT, NRSV). The exclamatory nature of halēlū yāh can be supported by two lines of argument. First, the phrase halēlū yāh is consistently used absolutely and only as an opening or closing expression (except in the case of Ps 135:3). This distinguishes halēlū yāh from an expression such as halēlūhā (“praise him”), which always has some sort of clause or phrase attached (see the multiple examples in Ps 150). Second, the LXX is consistent in not translating halēlū yāh but in transliterating it as allelouia (Westermann, TLOT 1:371-76). Again, this distinguishes halēlū yāh from expressions such as halēlūhā, which the LXX regularly translates with the imperative aineite (“praise”). The LXX translates the exceptional Psalm 135:3 with the imperative aineite (“praise”), showing that it correctly understood this one instance as a command/imperative and not an exclamation.

2.2. Praise as a Command. Most of the time, however, the imperatives of hālāl (“praise”) and its synonyms, bārak (“bless”), gādal (“magnify”), yādā (“give thanks”), kābēd (“glorify”) and sāḇah (“praise”), are commands and not exclamations. As commands, these imperatives require a response. The response looked for is not the use of the exclamation “Praise the Lord!” but is the acknowledging and confessing of God’s attributes and actions (Brueggemann; Clifford; Futato 2002). To praise is to acknowledge who God is and what God has done and, in so doing, to render honor and glory to God as the object of praise. Psalm 134:1-3 comes the closest to providing a definition of “praise” when *David says, “I will praise the Lord at all times. . . . Come, let us tell of the Lord’s greatness.” To praise the Lord is to tell of his greatness by reciting his attributes and actions. Psalm 103:1-8 is an example, where the psalmist praises (bārak) God by confessing God’s actions (forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies) and his attributes (compassionate, gracious, patient, loving).

3. The Structure of the Hymn.
The hymn typically falls into three sections (Estes). The hymn begins by inviting others in the community or beyond to join the psalmist in praising God. The central section delineates the praiseworthy character and actions of God and thereby provides the content or reasons or motivation for praising God. The hymn concludes on a positive note that is usually something like an affirmation of faith or an invitation to continue the praise and *worship of God forever. Psalm 117, the shortest in the Psalter, provides a clear and concise example.

[1] Praise the Lord, all you nations.
   Praise him, all you people of the earth.
[2] For he loves us with unfailing love;
   the Lord’s faithfulness endures forever.
[3] Praise the Lord! (NLT)

4. The Content of the Hymn.
In a word, the content of the hymn is praise. This can be unpacked by examining how praise fills each of the three sections of the hymn.

4.1. The Invitation to Praise. The hymns ultimately invite the entire universe to praise the Lord. On the smallest scale, however, David, in
Psalm 103:1-2, invites himself to praise the Lord.

Psalm 103:1-2, invites himself to praise the Lord.

Praise the LORD, I tell myself; with my whole heart, I will praise his holy name.

Praise the LORD, I tell myself, and never forget the good things he does for me. (NLT, 1st ed.)

Sometimes the psalmist broadens the invitation to include the priests and Levites, as Psalm 135:19b-20a.

O house of Aaron, praise the LORD; O house of Levi, praise the LORD. (NIV)

Sometimes the invitation also goes to the entire congregation of Israel, as in Psalm 118:1-2.

Give thanks to the LORD, for is good! His faithful love endures forever.

Let the congregation of Israel repeat: “His faithful love endures forever.” (NLT, 1st ed.)

At other times the psalmist expands the invitation even further to include all the nations, as in Psalm 117:1.

Praise the LORD, all you nations.

Praise him, all you people of the earth. (NLT)

A few times, Psalm 29:1-2 being one (see also Ps 103:20-21), the psalmist transcends the earth to enlist the angels of heaven in the praise of God.

Give honor to the LORD, you angels; give honor to the LORD for his glory and strength. (NLT, 1st ed.)

In unmatched exuberance Psalm 148 calls the whole created realm to join the chorus. Psalm 148:16 invites the heavens and its countless hosts to praise the Lord: “Praise the LORD from the heavens” (Ps 148:1). Then Psalm 148:7-14 summons every part of the earth, animate and inanimate, to praise God, who has created and maintains the world: “Praise the LORD from the earth” (Ps 148:7). Psalm 148:13 captures the whole as well as any one verse can.

Let them all praise the name of the LORD. For his name is very great;

his glory towers over the earth and heaven! (NLT)

4.2. The Content of Praise. The central section of the hymn provides the content or reasons or motivation for praising God. Here the psalmist expresses the substance of praise by reciting God’s attributes and actions. This section typically takes up most of the space in the hymn and brings a variety of themes into focus. Psalmists often introduce these themes with the Hebrew word קִי, which can be translated “for” or “because.” Recall Psalm 117 as an example: “Praise the LORD. . . . For [קִי] great is his love toward us” (NIV).

Most of the hymns fall into one of three subgenres: hymns of divine kingship (see Kingship Psalms), hymns of creation, or hymns of redemption (Coogan). The hymns of divine kingship celebrate the Lord’s rule over heaven and earth. One example is Psalm 29, which ends with this affirmation:

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.

The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace. (Ps 29:10-11 NIV)

This psalm show that God’s kingship results in great blessing for his people.

4.2.1. Divine Kingship. Three hymns of divine kingship (Ps 93; 97; 99) begin with the acclamation יְהוָה מָלַךְ, which is customarily translated either “the LORD is king” (NAB, NLT, NRSV, NJPS) or “the LORD reigns” (ESV, NASB, NIV, NKJV). Psalm 96:10 contains this phrase within the psalm, and Psalm 47:8 [MT 47:9] has a similar acclamation, מָלַךְ אֱלֹהִים (“God reigns” or “God is king”). Since the days of S. Mowinckel the proper translation of this phrase has been debated. An alternate translation is “the LORD/God has become king.” J. Day has presented a compelling defense of this translation. The perfect form of the verb מָלַךְ can be translated “became king” (1 Kings 16:23a), “reigned” (1 Kings 16:23b) or “has become king” (1 Sam 12:14; 2 Sam 15:10; 1 Kings 1:11, 13, 18; 2 Kings 9:13), but clear examples of “is king” are lacking in the Hebrew Bible. Contrary to common opinion, word order is irrelevant to this discussion, since the inceptive sense (“has become”) is found with the order subject/predicate and the order predicate/subject. Com-
pare “But now Adonijah has become king ([אֲדוֹנִיָּ֣yah mālak])” (1 Kings 1:18) with “Have you not heard that Adonijah, the son of Haggith, has become king ([mālak ’ādōniyyāh])? . . .?” (1 Kings 1:11). Moreover, the context of mālak ’ēlōhim in Psalm 47:8 [MT 47:9] provides the best evidence for the inceptive rendering. God has just ascended, having won a great victory (Ps 47:5), and has just taken his seat on his royal throne and begun to reign (Ps 47:8).

Although it is true that from one perspective God has always been king, it is equally true from another perspective that on specific occasions God “became king” in a new sense. G. Vos (342) says, “It will be remembered that the shout ‘Absalom is King’ was the shout of acclaim at his assumption of the kingship.” So even if we stay with the traditional translation “the LORD/God is king/reigns,” the parallels with the use of this phrase in reference to human kings indicates that this is an acclamation used at the inception of the king’s reign. In reference to the Lord becoming king, Vos goes on to say, “By this is meant a form of statement representing Jehovah as becoming, or revealing himself in the last crisis the victorious King of Israel” (324), and “The simple solution seems to lie in this that ‘kingship’ is in the O.T. more a concept of action than of status. Jehovah becomes King = Jehovah works acts of deliverance” (342 n. 33), and “The thought is not merely that Jehovah becomes King in order to save, but that through the salvation, as well as in other acts, He arrives at the acme of his royal splendor” (344) (For this same idea of God beginning to reign in the NT, see Rev 11:17, where English translations are agreed in translating the aorist ebasileusas with “begun to reign.”). There are two key actions through which the Lord “becomes king”: creation and redemption.

4.2.2. Creation. The quintessential hymn of creation is Psalm 104, which opens with a portrayal of God as the glorious king.

Let all that I am praise the LORD;
O LORD my God, how great [gādōl] you are!
You are robed with honor and majesty;
you are dressed in a robe of light.
(Ps 104:1-2 NLT)

Just as we use the word “majesty” in association with royalty when we refer to a modern queen as “her Majesty,” the ancient Hebrews used the word “great” (gādōl) in association with royalty. Psalm 47:2 refers to God as “a great [gādōl] king.” In the same way, Psalm 95:3 refers to the Lord as “a great [gādōl] king.” In the context of the ancient world at large this expression would be better translated as “the Great King,” since it is almost a technical phrase used to refer to the king who reigns supreme over all other kings and kingdoms. This is why the full text of Psalm 95:3 reads,

For the Lord is a great God,
the great King above all gods. (NIV)

In saying that God is “great,” Psalm 104 shouts the praise of the King of kings and Lord of lords. This interpretation is confirmed by the word pair “honor and majesty” (hōd wēhādār). “Honor and majesty” are regularly associated with royalty in the book of Psalms. In Psalm 21:5 God dresses the human king with “splendor and majesty” (hōd wēhādār).

Your victory brings him [the human king]
great honor,
and you have clothed him with splendor and
majesty [hōd wēhādār]. (NLT)

In the same way, the divine King is “robed with honor and majesty” in Psalm 104:1. The image is that of God dressed in the magnificent regalia of a reigning monarch. The point is that God’s creating and governing of the universe was and is the activity of a king.

4.2.3. Redemption. God also “becomes king” through acts of redemption. Psalm 47, for example, invites the nations to praise the Lord as the “great King over all the earth” (Ps 47:2). He is the God who has just “become king” (Ps 47:9), when he defeated the Canaanite kingdoms and granted the land to Israel (Ps 47:3-4).

Hymns of redemption celebrate “the mighty acts of the LORD,” what God has done not in primeval history but rather in Israel’s history.

Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD
or fully declare his praise? (Ps 106:2 NIV)
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the next generation the
praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
(Ps 78:4 NIV)
HYMNS

Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;
makes known among the nations what he has
done. (Ps 105:1 NIV)

The “mighty acts of the LORD” include his
deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Ps 78:52;
105:26-27; 114:1-2), his dividing of the Red Sea
(Ps 78:13; 106:8-11; 114:3-6), his giving of the law
(Ps 78:5), his care in the wilderness (Ps 78:14-16;
105:39-42; 114:8) and his granting of the land
(Ps 47:4; 78:55).

Psalm 136 combines the themes of creation
and redemption. In this psalm God’s “great
wonders (Ps 136:4) include his creation of the
heavens (Ps 136:5-9) and his redemption of Isra-
el from Egypt, through the wilderness, and to
the promised land (Ps 136:10-22). As this and the
foregoing examples show, the subcategories of
hymns of divine kingship, creation and redemp-
tion are not rigid but rather are fluid and flexi-
ble (Longman).

4.3. The Conclusion of Praise. In keeping with
the positive tone of the first two sections, the
hymns come to a conclusion on an equally posi-
tive note. Quite frequently, the conclusion con-
tains a repeated invitation to praise. Thus Psalm
103 ends,

Praise the LORD, you angels,
you mighty ones who carry out his plans,
listening for each of his commands.
Yes, praise the LORD, you armies of angels
who serve him and do his will!
Praise the LORD, everything he has created,
everything in all his kingdom.
Let all that I am praise the Lord.
(Ps 103:20-22 NLT)

The hymn may also come to a close with a
strong affirmation of faith in the Lord, as is the
case in Psalm 29, which affirms that the Lord
rules over the world, and that this rule will result
in great blessing for the Lord’s people.

The LORD rules over the floodwaters.
The LORD reigns as king forever.
The LORD gives his people strength.
The LORD blesses them with peace.
(Ps 29:10-11 NLT)

5. The Use of the Hymn.
Brueggemann has well argued that there were
and are at least two ways in which the hymns
functioned and function. One can be called “ar-
ticulations of order,” and the other “affirmations
of faith.”

5.1. Articulations of Order. Perhaps no text
better captures the essence of the hymn as an
articulation of a well-ordered life than does
Psalm 16:5-6.

LORD, you have assigned me my portion and
my cup;
you have made my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in
pleasant places:
surely I have a delightful inheritance. (NIV)

These are the words of someone who is ex-
périencing life in all of its goodness. The life re-
lected in the hymn knows no trouble; it is a
happy, blessed life. Fear and anxiety are no-
where to be found, because God in his faithful-
ness is maintaining the order in life that he
intended from the very beginning. If Genesis 1
reveals anything about God’s intention for cre-
ation, it is that creation is to be experienced as
well ordered. The rhythm of “and God said” and
“God saw that it was good” and “there was
evening and there was morning” underscores
the orderliness and goodness intended by God
for the world that he made. The hymn is thus
fundamentally a creation psalm—that is, a
psalm that knows the Creator to be reliable in
maintaining a well-ordered world. “Creation
here is not a theory about how the world came
to be…. It is rather an affirmation that God’s
faithfulness and goodness are experienced as
generosity, continuity, and regularity” (Bruegge-
mann, 26). The primary use of the hymn was
and is to articulate our praise and gratitude to
God for the good life that he has so generously
granted to us.

5.2. Affirmations of Faith. Life, however, is not
always experienced as well ordered and good,
sometimes for known reasons and at other times
for reasons unknown. Even the great poet who
composed Psalm 104, the quintessential poetic
articulation of a well-ordered world, was aware
of this when he said, “But may sinners vanish
from the earth and the wicked be no more” (Ps
104:35). He knew that the presence of “sinners”
could disrupt the good order of life (Allen). So,
what role can the hymns play in lives character-
ized by chaos and disorientation? Brueggemann
argues that the hymn can also function as an af-
firmation of faith, as a “great evangelical nevertheless.” The hymn expresses the deep desire of the human heart for life as God intends. The human heart knows its origin, life in all of its abundance. The human heart knows the destiny that God desires for all, life in all of its abundance. The human heart longs to experience this life now and not only in the future. This is why the poet who wrote Psalm 27 said,

Yet I am confident that I will see the LORD’s goodness while I am here in the land of the living.
(Ps 27:13 NLT)

The hymn can thus be used to express a profound hope that God will show up not in theory but rather in the concrete realities of life and bring order out of chaos. The hymn is an affirmation of faith that Jesus truly came to bring life in all of its abundance (John 10:10).

See also CULT, WORSHIP: PSALMS; FORM CRITICISM; LYRIC POETRY; MUSIC, SONG; PSALMS 1: BOOK OF; REFRAIN; RHYME.