

## READING THE PSALMS WITH A MISSIONARY MIND

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### Abstract

*The Book of Psalms has traditionally been read by Christians as a source of personal devotion, comfort, and encouragement in times of suffering and spiritual reflection. However, its role within the broader theology of mission has often been overlooked. This article examines the missionary implications of the Psalter and explores why the Psalms should be understood not only as expressions of worship but also as instruments of God's mission to the nations. The study first addresses common objections that the Psalms are directed primarily to Israel and are therefore not concerned with the Gentile world. By examining several psalms that explicitly call the nations to worship the God of Israel, the article demonstrates that the Psalter contains a significant universal dimension. The study then highlights two central themes that shape the missionary theology of the Psalms: worship and the Messiah. Worship in the temple functioned as a means of proclaiming the greatness of God to the surrounding nations, while the Messianic psalms anticipate a universal reign of the Messiah that extends beyond Israel to all peoples. Finally, the article considers the implications of the Psalms for the contemporary church, arguing that true worship naturally leads to mission and that Christian mission is inseparable from the person and work of the Messiah. The Psalter therefore serves not only as a devotional resource but also as a theological foundation for the church's participation in God's redemptive mission to the world.*

**Keywords:** Psalms; Mission Theology; Worship; Messianic Psalms; Biblical Missiology; Temple Worship; Nations; Old Testament Theology.

### INTRODUCTION

During one of the Pastor's conferences, a resource person asked this important question: What is the purpose of reading the Psalms? Without a doubt, my immediate answer was devotion and encouragement during times of trouble and sorrow. Later, my contemplation of studying the book of Psalms led me to search for various answers to the question of why we need to read Psalms. The reading of Psalms has been the source of hope, comfort, and blessings to Christians. Psalms contain several themes such as praise, repentance, songs, prophecy, poetry, prayer, thanksgiving, joy, and sorrow.

The purpose of the article is to explore and examine the answer to why we need to read Psalms, and why only Psalms? Why not other books of the scriptures? There are two reasons for the choice of Psalms. The first reason is that the book of Psalms has been read by Christians regardless of their doctrinal or theological background. The book of Psalms has been a source of peace and comfort for Christians facing trials and troubles. The book of Psalms has been the most widely read book of the scriptures. The second reason is that reading the book of Psalms does not require a theological, historical, or linguistic orientation from its readers. It is easy to read and understand.

There are several commentators have made significant contributions to the universal and missionary implications of the Psalms.<sup>1</sup> After examining the various authors and their contributions to understanding the theology of missions in the Psalms. It will be appropriate to acknowledge that the theology of missions begins in the Garden of Eden. The proto-Gospel was introduced in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:15). Here we see the beginning and pattern of God's mission to the world.

Before we explore the missionary aspects of the book of Psalms, we should consider why it was ignored in discussions of missions. Michael Landon identifies two objections in his article. The article highlights two objections regarding the book of Psalms.

### THE PSALMS ARE ABOUT GOD'S PEOPLE, NOT FOR GENTILES

The first objection to rejecting the Psalms as a book that contains missionary themes is that the Psalms are about God's people, and they are not written for the Gentiles. It is a fact that Christian theologians and scholars<sup>2</sup> agree that most of the Psalms are directed to the Israelites, but in the process, an amazing number of Psalms address, or make a noteworthy reference to the people from around the nations of Israel. Author George Peter identified 175 examples of universalistic concern for the other nations of the world, but he did not list them down.<sup>3</sup>

However, author Landon identifies thirty Psalms that make important references to Gentiles being called to worship or obey the God of Israel. Psalms 1, 2, 22, 24, 33, 40, 45, 46, 47, 49, 50, 58, 66, 67, 68, 72, 82, 86, 87, 95, 96, 97, 98, 102, 105, 108, 115, 117, 135, 138, 145, 146, and 148.<sup>4</sup> The Psalms mention the neighboring nations of Israel. The names of Egypt, Babylon, and etc.

Psalms 66 contains the names of nations around Israel. The two words that are used in Psalms 66 are *all the earth* and *O People*. In the first verse of Psalm 66, the Psalms invites all the

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<sup>1</sup> W. Stuart McCullough, *Introduction to Psalms* (vol.4 of IB; Nashville: Abingdon, 1955), 13; Clyde M. Miller, *Psalms 76-150* (Living Word Commentary; Austin; Sweet, 1980), 268, 440; Anthony L. Ash, *Psalms 1-75* (Living Word Commentary; Austin; Sweet, 1980), 221; Willem A Van Gemeren *Psalms* (vol. 5 of Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Roger E. Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1972); Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (3d ed.; Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Landon, Michael. 2002. "The Psalms as Mission." *Restoration Quarterly* 44 (3): 165–75.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

earth that includes the nations of the world to “Shout for Joy to the Lord all the earth” (Psalms 66:1). The people of the earth are invited to praise God. “Praise our God O people” these two words have the missiological implications to invite the nations and people around Israel to participate in the worship of Israel and become the witness of YHWH.

### PSALMS ARE ABOUT PRAISE AND WORSHIP, NOT FOR MISSION

The second objection to rejecting the Psalms as a book that contains missionary themes is that most of the Psalms were written for Praise and Worship in the Sanctuary or temple of Israel. The purpose and Praise and Worship of Israel was to call the nations around Israel to worship the God of YHWH. Author Archard points out that,

“The sole purpose of the writers of the Psalms is to praise the God of Israel... YHWH deserves the praise of the whole creation; this is the thought that is voiced in more than one psalm. It is not only the nations that are to be summoned by the faithful among the chosen people. The heavens, the earth, the rivers, and even the sea must also applaud the God of Israel.”<sup>5</sup>

Whenever the Israelites sang and praised their God YHWH, the songs and praises were heard by the nations around Israel. As Stuhlmüller observes, “The prayer of Israel reached outward to the nations principally in the hymns of praise.”<sup>6</sup> The intent of worship is missions.

After looking at the general objections by the Christians for rejecting the missionary nature of Psalms, the paper will now examine the two significant themes of Psalms. These two themes, worship and Messiah, characterize the mission theology of the Psalms. The first theme of the Psalm is its very nature of worship. Through worship, the people of Israel proclaim the mighty deeds of YHWH.

### The Worship – Center of God’s Missions

Worship is one of the themes of the Book of Psalms, along with others. The number of Psalms has the theme of worship. Psalms 9 1-2, 11-12, 105 1 3, 92 1 2, 66 8 9, 13-15, 92:13, 117, 67:1-7 contain the theme of worship. All these Psalms passages are set in the worship that takes place on Mount Zion. The Psalms and the temple worship are means by which the fame of God of Israel is published and proclaimed to all nations.<sup>7</sup>

The temple is the place where heaven and earth meet to proclaim God’s rulership over all creation and nations. As author Landon rightly observes, “the temple of Israel is the center and microcosm of the created world.”<sup>8</sup> Psalm 99:1-2 proclaims the greatness of God and his invitation to the nations around Israel.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Martin-Archard, *A Light to the Nations* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 58, quoted in Peters, *Biblical Theology*, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Carroll Stuhlmüller, “Foundations for Mission in the Old Testament” in *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (ed. Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmüller, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Landon, Michael. 2002. “The Psalms as Mission.” *Restoration Quarterly* 44 (3):165–75.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

*The LORD reigns;  
let the peoples tremble!  
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim;  
let the earth quake!  
The LORD is great in Zion;  
he is exalted over all the peoples (Ps 99:1-2)<sup>9</sup>*

The glory and fame of God did not merely go out from the temple of Jerusalem; even more than this, the temple and its worship were the magnet that drew all nations to the true God. The invitation of God to the surrounding nations to praise God is not the kind that encourages them to take a few moments from their busy schedules and remember God wherever they may be. All peoples were summoned to Jerusalem, the place where God's glory dwelt. The psalms offer invitations to all the nations to participate in the worship.

*Shout to the LORD,  
All the earth!  
Serve the LORD with gladness!  
Come before him with singing!...  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
And his courts with praise;  
Praise him, bless his name. (Ps 110:1,2,4).*

According to Isa 56:7, the temple was designated to be "a house of prayer for all nations." People from all nations come to Jerusalem, heard praises, and recounting of the wonderful works of the Lord, and returned to their own countries with the saving knowledge of God. Author Arthur Weiser observes that the believing Gentile known as the God-fearer becomes a frequent visitor to the temple beginning at least after the exile (Pss 115:8-13; 118:2-4; 135:19-20).<sup>10</sup>

Author Alan Ludwig rightly asserts that "The worship and liturgy that took place in the temple on Mount Zion was God's ultimate "mission Strategy."<sup>11</sup> Why the temple was given so much importance in the theology of Psalms? How did the Psalter view the temple and its significance? Author D. Levenson observes that "the Israelite temple was a microcosm of creation"<sup>12</sup> Author D. Hummel takes the argument to further step. He asserts that the temple was a miniature new creation, a small portion of the eschatological new heavens and earth. Further,

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<sup>9</sup> See also Pss 86:8-10; 102:12; 150:1-6.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans Herbert Hartwell, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 725.

<sup>11</sup> Ludwig, Alan. 2014. "Mission in the Psalms." *Logia* 23 (3): 11–19.

<sup>12</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai, and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 138-39. Levenson terms the temple as "an epitome of the world a concentrated form of its essence, a miniature of the cosmos" (138), a form of the world" (142).

he comments that the temple is where eschatology was already realized in measure.<sup>13</sup> The psalms leave us with the impression that all nations had full and free access to the God of Israel through his temple. Psalm 98 is a classic example of this in its universality.

Shout to the LORD, all the earth;  
Break forth into song and sing praises!  
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,  
With the lyre and the sound of melody!  
With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
Shout before the King, the LORD! (Ps 98:4-6).

This is the preview of what will be in the last days when all the nations will come and worship God without restriction (Ps 86:9; Rev 15:4). During the Old Temple of Jerusalem tiny fraction of humanity ever came to the temple, and an interestingly gentile entrance into the temple borders was greatly restricted. This scenario will change in the New Jerusalem: worship in the new temple will include all the nations and people. “Who will not fear you, LORD, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (Rev 15:4). This is the ultimate Mission theology of the Psalms.

### THE MESSIAH-THE FOCUS OF PSALMS

The second theme of the Psalms, with a special reference to Missions, is the theme of the Messiah. According to Ludwig, “God’s mission is rooted in the mission of the Messiah. God’s mission is also Messianic.”<sup>14</sup> The renowned missionary to Africa, David Livingstone, said that “God had only one Son and He made that Son a missionary.”<sup>15</sup> The Psalms talk about the Missionary Messiah. There are several Psalms focused on the Messiah. However, four Psalms are often applied to Christ and to the mission of the Messiah in the New Testament: Psalms 2, 22, 110, and 118. All these Psalms are Messianic in scope, and they are all universal in scope, with words for the nations.

Psalm 2 is the primary example of the Messianic Psalms. After reporting the plots of nations and kings, and telling of his divine sonship and inheritance of the nations, the anointed king speaks words both of terror and comfort:

Therefore, you kings, be wise;  
be warned, you rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear  
and celebrate his rule with trembling.  
Kiss his son, or he will be angry  
and your way will lead to your destruction,  
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.

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<sup>13</sup> Horace D. Hummel, “The Did Testament Basis of Typological interpretation,” *Biblical Research* 9 (1964): 46.

<sup>14</sup> Ludwig, Alan. 2014. “Mission in the Psalms.” *Logia* 23 (3): 11–19.

<sup>15</sup> Kane Herbert, *The Making of a Missionary In Understanding Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1982). 15-38.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps 2:10-12).

According to Weiser, Psalm 2 was sung at the king's coronation.<sup>16</sup> At every coronation of every king who sat on the throne of his father David, the singers and hearers of the Psalm could not help but notice how far their little kingdom and the fallible king fell short of the description found in the Psalm. While singing the Psalms, they could only hope for another more glorious Seed of David, the true Anointed, who would fulfill and even overflow the words of this particular Psalm.<sup>17</sup>

The king, who is the representation of the LORD, the Messiah, preached to the nations in his address to the nations. The king preached to the peoples of the earth about God's deliverance. David sang:

Thus, I will praise you among the nations, O LORD,  
And sing praises to your name.  
Great deliverance he gives to his king,  
And shows mercy to his anointed,  
to David and his seed forever (Ps 18:49-50).

Psalms 18 and 22 are both Messianic.<sup>18</sup> Whatever historical circumstances in the life of David they may or may not reflect, it is certain that the words of these psalms are the prophetic voice of David speaking of his greater Son and Lord. They are simultaneously the voice of Christ speaking through his royal ancestor.<sup>19</sup> In the Sanctuary, Christ through David proclaimed the name and deeds of God not only in the presence of the faithful but also "among the nations." This has implications for a contemporary theology of mission as well. The book of Psalms suggests that an Israelite participated in missions by engaging in temple worship. As he went up to Jerusalem for the appointed feasts and joined in the praises of the temple rituals, his lips united with the lips of his fellow Israelites in offering praises and thanksgiving to God, recounting the mighty deeds of the LORD in the hearing of the nations.

## CONCLUSION

Reading the Psalms will raise several questions. Is the missiology of the Psalms still valid in the contemporary church? What application does the mission theology of the Psalms have to offer to the present church? There are a number of suggestions the present church can learn from reading the Psalms.

First of all, in light of the mission, the reader needs to revise their understanding of the Psalms. The Psalms are read not only to find comfort, joy, and hope. The reading of Psalms will

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<sup>16</sup> Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans Herbert Hartwell, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 109-10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ludwig, Alan. 2014. "Mission in the Psalms." *Logia* 23 (3): 11–19.

<sup>19</sup> Ps 18:49 is cited in Rom 15:9 Ps 22:22 is cited in Heb 2:12 (cf. Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; John 19:24).

motivate the readers to find comfort, joy, and hope. All these three elements are part of missions. The readers of the Psalms are entitled to become missionaries to the world. Apostle Paul admonished the believers, “Speak to one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19: compare with Col 3:16). Apostle Paul exhorts that the church members should be able to remind one another that they are missionaries to preach, teach, and baptize.

Second, the Psalms show that there can be no dichotomy between worship and missions. In fact, true worship is the foundation of missions. Therefore, if the readers of the Psalms are truly mission-minded, they will cultivate the practice of true worship. True worship will enable the believers to “worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness (Ps 96:9). Worship that connects the heaven and earth will become the deciding factor in the last days. The first Angel message urges the believers to commit themselves to the true worship of a true God. “He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.” (Rev 14:7).

Finally, the Psalms will instruct us that missions cannot be divorced from the Messiah. Christian mission theology is rooted in and fulfilled by the mission of the Messiah. The mission is to introduce the new believer to love and to understand the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. The decisive goal of the life of the Messiah, as declared by the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, and to comfort all who mourn (Isaiah 61:1-3). Any reader who reads the Psalms with a missionary mind will agree with author Peter’s bold affirmation that “the Psalms are one of the greatest missionary books in the world.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1972).

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