

Notes on Psalm 73

II. QUOTABLE QUOTES AND SUMMARY NOTES

A. Summaries of Psalm 73

1. "At first glance it appears that it [the psalm] begins and ends at the same place. However, the confident promise of v 1¹ is questioned and undermined in vv. 2-16, and then in v. 17 a type of reimagining occurs The psalm in essence, presents a hypothesis and questions that hypothesis, coming finally to a resolution." (Tanner, 584.)
2. Surely God is good! (v.1)
My problem (vv. 2-3)
The wicked are well off (vv. 4-12)
Surely I have been good for nothing (vv. 13-16)
Until I came into God's presence (v. 17)
Surely I see the fate of the wicked (vv. 18-20)
My problem resolved (vv. 21-27)
God is good! (v. 28). (Tanner *et al.*, Psalms 585.)
3. "This is one of the so-called wisdom psalms . . . , which reflect on life's deepest issues. This psalm eloquently expresses total abandonment to the God of the universe. It reflects on the seemingly carefree life of the wicked who prosper (vv. 3-12), echoing sentiments expressed in Ps 49. Concern for the downtrodden in the previous psalm (72:4) contrasts with the grim present reality—the pride of the wicked (v. 6). Ps 73 picks up on Solomon's prayer in 72:7 that the righteous would flourish and prosper (s 1:3 also asserts), but Ps 73 turns that prayer around, asserting that the wicked seem to prosper without any consequences (contrary to what 1:4 asserts). But Ps 73 ends by expressing profound truth about the meaning of life, which is revealed only in God's presence (vv. 15-28, especially vv. 17, 28) and only in one's total abandonment to him (vv. 25-26)." (Howard, ZNIVSB, 1076, slightly adapted.)

B. Pointed Statements

1. Order amid 'confusion': "The psalm may speak of confusion and doubt, but it does so in a very orderly way. Verses 1-12 explain the problem in twelve lines; vv. 13-17 serve as the turning point; followed by the solution to the problem also in twelve lines." (Tanner, 584, slightly adapted, invoking McCann.)
2. Interpretation of the outcome of the turning point: "The poet calms himself with the solution of the riddle that has come to him; and it would be beneath his dignity as a man to allow himself any further to be tempted by doubting thoughts. Placing himself upon the standpoint of the end, he sees how the ungodly come to terrible destruction in a moment; they come to an end . . . in consequence of . . . frightful occurrences. It is with them as with a dream, after . . . one is awake. One forgets the vision on account of its nothingness (Job 20:8). So the evil-doers who boast themselves . . . are before God a . . . phantom or unsubstantial shadow." (K&D, 318-19.)

¹ That an initial claim is questioned in this, the middle psalm of the psalter (based on taking the conclusion to begin at Ps 146), leads one to suspect that this signals the fact that this psalm also seems to question the thesis of Psalm 1. In short, just as Brueggemann has argued that this psalm flirts with questioning Psalm 1, this may be signalled by the Psalm questions its own first verse.

C. Structure of the Book of Psalms and Book III in Particular

The Book of Psalms as a Whole

“The structure of the Book of Psalms. . . is not a random structure. Rather, an unfolding story line reflects the great, overarching theme of God’s sovereign rule as the great King.

In the introductory Pss 1–2, God the king installs his chosen, anointed king on Mount Zion as his royal representative (Ps 2) and the exemplar of the righteous man (Ps 1). David is the OT symbol of the righteous king, and his psalms dominate Book I (Pss 3-41), where the prevailing note is one of lament, arising out of David’s distresses.

In Book II (Pss 42-72) other voices join David’s (the sons of Korah, Asaph), and it occasionally notes national concerns alongside individual ones. The book ends on a high note, speaking of the ideal human king as one with a universal reign (Ps 72).

Book III (Pss 73-89) is one of crisis, both personal and national. It begins with doubts about God’s justice (Ps 73) and ends with two despairing psalms (Pss 88-89), the final one questioning God’s commitment to the Davidic covenant.

Book IV (Pss 90-106) marks a major turning point in the Psalter. The focus turns to a time when there was no human king, the time of Moses (Ps 90). It celebrates God’s rule as the great King (Pss 93-99). Book IV answers the despair at the end of Book III. It says, in effect, that if people were tempted to look for their security in the Davidic king, then they would end up disappointed; they needed to look to the Lord as their refuge and strength and as their great King.

Book V (Pss 107-150) shows that God’s commitment to his promises to David remained unwavering, and David therefore returns to prominence in this book, especially at the beginning and end (Pss 108-110, 138-45) and in the important Ps 132. The book ends by extolling David, the Lord’s anointed king (Ps 144), and the Lord himself, the divine King (Ps 145), echoing the beginning of the Psalter (Pss 1-2), which also features the Lord and his anointed king. And in the final climax of praise (Pss 146-50), Psalm 149 anticipates God’s victory over the rebellious nations and rulers introduced in Ps 2.

Jesus, the Son of God and son of David, embodies and fulfills the promises of the psalms, which are rooted in the promises God gave to Abraham and David concerning the blessings he would give their descendants, and through them, all peoples. God promised Abraham that kings would come from his line (Gen 17:6, 16; 35:11), later revealed as being through the line of Judah (Gen 49:10). In 2 Sam 7:11-16, God promised David—who was from the line of Judah—that he would always have a descendant on the throne (see also 89:3-4, 28-37; 132). He was God’s chosen, anointed king sitting on ‘the throne of the Lord’ (1 Chr 29:23), with God’s kingdom entrusted into the care of his descendants (2 Chr 13:5,8). David was the symbol of the ideal, godly king, the standard by which later kings would be judged (e.g., 1 Kgs 15:3, 11; 2 Kgs 14:3; 16:2; 18:3; 22:2). In the Psalter, the royal psalms celebrate this ideal, which David embodies (. . . Pss 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 132; 144).

But even the godliest OT kings—David, Hezekiah, Josiah—fell short of the true, ideal King, and so the ultimate fulfillment of the promises to Abraham and David had to await the coming of their great descendant, Jesus Christ, i.e., Jesus the Messiah (see Matt 1:1). The Davidic psalms, then, ultimately point ahead to Jesus, the anointed King and the greatest of the sons of David.

Jesus was the ultimate example of the righteous person in Ps 1 and of God’s anointed son, the King Messiah, in Ps 2. Jesus also experienced most of the same travails that David and other psalmists did, so their laments and prayers anticipated his own (e.g., Pss 16, 22, 69). The NT repeatedly shows

the psalms being fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus (e.g., Matt 13:34-35; 21:16, 42; John 2:17; 15:25; 19:24, 28, 36; Acts 2:25-35; 13:32-37; Rom 15:3; 1 Cor 15:25-27; 1 Pet 2:7).

The psalms thus represent a priceless treasure trove of resources for relating to God in all circumstances. They instruct us in how to live, and they teach us great truths about God the great King, his sovereign rule over all things, and his plan for reconciling the world to himself through his Son, Jesus Christ.” (Howard, *ZNIVSB*, 976, emphasis mine.)

More on Book III of the Psalms

Book III has been called “the Book of Crisis,”² for its many psalms on that topic (73-74, 78-80, 83, 85-86, 88-89). Unlike most of the psalms in Books I and II, which are individualistic and often about David, most in Book III are communal or national and only one, 86, concerns David directly. (The only individual focused psalms here are 73, 77, 84, 86, 88.). As Howard notes, “The book ends with two very downward beat psalms: the darkest psalm in the psalter (Ps 88) precedes a psalm that questions God severely about the [apparently] ‘broken’ covenant that he made with David (Ps 89). The answers to the questions about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the exile [and, I would add, the fate of David’s dynasty] are not fully answered until Books IV and V.” (1076.)

Although the dire way in which Book III ends likely reflects the fact that “Book Three has been decisively shaped by the experience of exile and dispersion,” “Book Three [can also be taken to] represent . . . every time when the world and its violence make no sense, times when we do not understand why God does not simply fix it” and thus that “Book Three . . . and its themes fit as well today as they did in its ancient context” (Tanner, 583.)

The Psalmist’s Use of Pronouns in Psalm 73

v. 1: <i>Initial Affirmation: “He” x 1 [God] + “they” x 1 [Israel]</i>	GOD & ISRAEL
vv. 2-3: <i>Where the Psalmist Nearly Stumbles: “I/me”—5 times!</i>	I [THE PSALMIST] & THEM [WICKED]
vv. 4-12 <i>Where the Psalmist Envis the Wicked: “They” (the comfortable)—20 times!</i>	THEM [THE WICKED]
vv. 13-15 <i>Where the Psalmist Recalls His Near Downfall: “I” -- 9 times!</i>	
+ “You” x 1 as in God [finally a reference to God]	I & YOU [GOD]
vv. 16-17 <i>Where the Psalmist Begins to Regain Perspective: “I” (4x) + God (1x) + them (1x)</i>	I, GOD & THEM
vv. 18-20 <i>Where the Psalmist Reflects on the Fate of the Wicked: “You” (4x) + “them” (6x)</i>	You & Them
vv. 21-22 <i>Where the Psalmist “Repents” of His Former Attitude: “I” (3x) + “You (1x)</i>	I & You
Vv. 23-26 <i>Where the Psalmist Revels in His New Outlook: “I” (10x) + “You/God” (7x)</i>	GOD & I
Vv. 27-28 <i>Where the Sum of It All is Given: “I” (4x), “they” (2x), “You” (4x), “God” (3x)</i>	I, GOD, YOU THEM

IV. RELEVANT TEXTS

John 6:66-69—*After some disciples fall away, Jesus asks the twelve, who give a good answer!*

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

² One scholar has described the psalms in this collection as a whole as being “marked by a sense of dire crisis: the community is on the verge of the unthinkable.” (Goulder, cited in Tanner et al., *Psalms*, 581.)