

The Generic and Theological Significance of ‘Why?’ and ‘How Long?’ in the Psalms of Complaint

Abstract

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The Psalms are made up of a variety of genres, many of which were used as liturgies to guide an individual/group in their worship of YHWH. The psalms of complaint, a sub-genre of the psalms of prayer, as argued by Craig C. Broyles, are one such genre. As was observed by Broyles, a distinguishing difference between the psalms of complaint and the other psalms of prayer is the prominence of the interrogatives ‘Why?’ and ‘How long?’ Although the other psalms of prayer do occasionally contain these interrogatives, within the psalms of complaint God is usually the subject of the question.

As was illustrated in this study, and is fairly obvious, both interrogatives have different meanings. Whether they are in real or rhetorical questions the meaning of the interrogative affects the meaning of the entire sentence. However, besides the different meanings it was also discovered that generally, even when both interrogatives are found in the same psalm, only one interrogative, not both, contains God as the subject of the question. This difference, in the meanings and the exclusive usage of ‘Why?’ and ‘How long?’ in the psalms of complaint, appears to suggest that their respective psalms were used for different occasions.

In support of this suggestion it was then observed that there is a correlation between an awareness of sin or innocence and the interrogative used, in their respective psalms of complaint. As ‘How long?’ complains about duration, is it a coincidence that its respective psalms often reflect an awareness of sin? Conversely, as ‘Why?’ complains

about reason, is it a coincidence that its respective psalms rarely reflect an awareness of sin? These same interrogatives in the ancient Near Eastern literature affirm that this correlation is more than a mere coincidence.