



## An Introduction to the Book of Psalms

### Title

The Book of Psalms, or Psalter, has supplied to believers some of their best-loved Bible passages. It is a collection of 150 poems that express a wide variety of emotions, including: love and adoration toward God, sorrow over sin, dependence on God in desperate circumstances, the battle of fear and trust, walking with God even when the way seems dark, thankfulness for God's care, devotion to the word of God, and confidence in the eventual triumph of God's purposes for the world.

The English title comes from the Greek word *psalmos*, which translates Hebrew *mizmor* or song, found in many of the Psalm titles and simply translated as psalm. This Greek name for the book was established by the time of the NT, e.g. Luke 20:42 and Acts 1:20. The Hebrew name for the book is *Tehillim* or Praises, pointing to the characteristic use of these songs as praises offered to God in public worship.

### Theme

The Hebrew label for the psalms 'Praises' may have originally reflected the idea, readily found today, that adoration and thanks to God are the primary acts of worship; but it would be better to learn from the title of the entire Psalter that the whole range of the psalms, from adoration and thanks to the needy cry for help, or even the desolate moan of Psalm 88, praises God when offered to him in the gathered worship of his people.

### Authorship, Occasion, and Date

Many of the psalms have titles, e.g. see Psalms 3 and 4. These titles can include liturgical directions, historical notes and, possibly the identity of the author. The Hebrew word translated 'of', as in 'of David', can mean, according to its context, 'belonging to', 'authored by', or 'about'; the same word can also be translated 'to', as in 'to the choirmaster'. In the expression 'a Psalm of David' as in Psalm 3 for example, the most natural sense is that it is 'of' David because David wrote it;

this is reflected in NT citations, e.g. Mark 12:36, Acts 2:25, Romans 4:6 and 11:9. Based on this, the simple 'of David', e.g. Psalm 11, is most readily taken in the same way.

Interpreting the titles this way yields David as the most common author of the Psalms: he appears in 73 titles, and the NT adds two more, Acts 4:25 for Psalm 2; and Hebrews 4:7 for Psalm 95. Other authors include the Sons of Korah (11 psalms), Asaph (12 psalms), Solomon (possibly two psalms), and Moses (one). Other psalms do not identify the author at all.

Davidic authorship corresponds well with biblical testimony. David was 'skilful in playing the lyre' (1 Samuel 16:16-23), and an accomplished songwriter (2 Samuel 1:17-27 and 22:1-23:7); his reputation as 'the sweet psalmist of Israel' (2 Samuel 23:1) is highly credible, as is the way 1 Chronicles presents him as taking an active role in developing Israel's worship, e.g. 1 Chronicles 16:4-7 and 25:1-7. The Sons of Korah served in the sanctuary (1 Chronicles 9:19), and some of them along with Asaph were **<<in charge of the service of song in the house of the Lord>>** (1 Chronicles 6:31b). It is also conceivable that these last two names represent the headwaters of choirs or guilds that bear their names. Solomon is known for his achievements in wisdom, but he also wrote songs (1 Kings 4:32), which could include two psalms, i.e. Psalm 127, and possibly Psalm 72. Moses provided songs for the whole assembled people (Exodus 15:1-18 and Deuteronomy 31:30-32:44).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, many scholars had concluded that the titles in Psalms had little or no validity; some of their strongest arguments involved the presence of words and phrases in the psalms that look more at home in later Hebrew or even Aramaic than in standard Biblical Hebrew; this would imply that the psalms as they exist today come from the first few centuries BC. However, the discovery of more ancient Near Eastern writings since that time has made it possible to give a fuller history of the Hebrew language and a fuller appreciation of ancient literary conventions, and it is now harder to sustain these arguments for late dating. Many scholars will now allow that quite a few of the psalms come from before the Babylonian exile. Coupled with the apparent antiquity of the authorship inscriptions, this provides a good reason for taking these inscriptions at face value. The NT authors accept David as author of the psalms attributed to him, e.g. Mark 12:36, Acts 1:16, 2:25, Romans 4:6 and 11:9, and sometimes the characters in a story make David's authorship a key part of their case, e.g. Luke 20:42, Acts 2:29, 2:34 and 13:36-39.

Fourteen of the Davidic psalms add further information in their titles, connecting the psalm to a specific incident in David's life. It is often said that they are later additions to the psalms, since they narrate events in the third person, while the psalm is in the first person. Some wonder as well whether such polished productions, e.g. Psalm 34, could have arisen from the circumstances described in the title. In reply, there is no reason why an author cannot narrate about himself

in the third person, e.g. Isaiah 20:2, Jeremiah 20:1-2, 21:1-3, 26:1-24 and Hosea 1:2-6; further, the titles do not imply that David composed the psalm at the time of the event, only that the event led to the psalm. The fact that two of the titles cannot be correlated with anything in 1-2 Samuel argues against the idea that a later editor added these titles after carefully examining biblical texts. Finally, this historical information often lends help to both interpreting the psalm and discerning how it should be applied. Therefore the notes that follow employ this information. Refer also to the Supplementary Material on the web site.

A few of the psalms seem originally to have been written for a particular occasion, and the individual expositions will discuss that possibility, e.g. Psalms 24, 68 and 118. Perhaps they came to be used in specific festivals in order to commemorate the original events. Some scholars have suggested that the liturgical calendar found in Leviticus is a late invention, and that the early period of Israel, when some of the psalms were first written, had annual festivals analogous to those found in other cultures; hence they tried to associate particular psalms with places in these hypothetical festivals. The evidence for such a construction is poor, and many today try to connect various psalms with the biblical festivals. One difficulty with this is that there is so little information in the OT itself about how many aspects of the worship were conducted. In addition to the festivals, Leviticus 23:3 sets the weekly Sabbath as a day of 'holy convocation'. It is unclear what kind of meeting is expected in the villages week by week, but it seems to be some kind of worship. Therefore, while it seems true that some psalms are intended for particular festivals or celebrations, e.g. Psalm 65 as a harvest thanksgiving, it also is clear that many psalms are suitable year round, and could be used as needed; indeed, Psalm 92 is a thanksgiving for the weekly Sabbath worship.

The individual psalms come from diverse periods of Israel's history: from the time of Moses, i.e. 15<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> Century BC, to that of David and Solomon (10<sup>th</sup> Century), down to exilic and postexilic times, e.g. Psalm 137. A number of factors clearly indicate that the Book of Psalms in its present form is the product of a process of collecting, and possibly of editing, from a variety of sources; such factors include:

- The division into five books and the affinity groupings, e.g. Psalms 1-2; 113-118, the Egyptian Hallel; Psalms 120-134, the Songs of Ascents; and the final Hallelujah of Psalms 146-150;
- The existence of the almost identical Psalms 14 and 53;
- The notice in 72:20 about the end of David's prayers, while there are still plenty of Davidic psalms to follow.

There is no way to tell what kind of editing the collectors might have done as they incorporated a composition into the developing Psalter; recognised scribal practices include minor things like updating spelling and grammar, and clarifying place names. If the regard for an author's inspiration was as high as it should have

been, 1 Chronicles 25:1-5 describes some of the psalmists as ‘prophesying’ and as ‘seers’, which means they convey God’s own words, then it is unlikely that the editors went much beyond the recognised scribal practices. It is likely that many of the psalms began as intensely personal poems, which were then adapted for congregational use, possibly even by the original author. It is also likely that some psalms were composed by stitching together pre-existing material, e.g. Psalm 108; but, for the faithful, it is the final form that is canonical, and that is the focus of these comments.

It appears that at every stage of this editorial process, the Psalter served as the songbook of the worshipping people of God.

### Key Themes

The Psalter is fundamentally the hymnbook of the people of God at worship. The Psalms take the basic themes of OT theology and turn them into song. Thus, themes common throughout the OT reappear in the Psalms and include the following:

1. *Monotheism*. The one true God, Maker of heaven and earth and ruler of all things, will vindicate his own goodness and justice, in his own time. Every human being must know and love this God, whose spotless moral purity, magnificent power and wisdom, steadfast faithfulness, and unceasing love are breathtakingly beautiful.
2. *Creation and fall*. Although God made man with dignity and purpose, all people since the fall are beset with sins and weaknesses that only God’s grace can heal.
3. *Election and covenant*. The one true God chose a people for himself and bound himself to them by his covenant. This covenant expressed God’s intention to save the people, and through them to bring light to the rest of the world.
4. *Covenant membership*. In his covenant, God offers his grace to his people: the forgiveness of their sins, the shaping of their lives in this world to reflect his own glory, and a part to play in bringing light to the Gentiles. Each member of God’s people is responsible to lay hold of this grace from the heart: to believe the promises, to grow in obeying the commands, and to keep on doing so all their lives long. Those who lay hold in this way are the faithful, as distinct from the unfaithful among God’s people; they enjoy the full benefits of God’s love, and they find boundless delight in knowing God. Each of the faithful is a member of a people, a corporate entity; the members have a mutual participation in the life of the whole people. Therefore the spiritual and moral well-being of the whole affects the well-being of each of the members, and each member contributes to the others by his own spiritual and moral life. Thus each one shares the joys and sorrows of

the others, and of the whole. The faithful will suffer in this life, often at the hands of the unfaithful, and sometimes from those outside God's people. The right response to this suffering is not personal revenge but believing prayer, confident that God will make all things right in his own time.

5. *Eschatology*. The story of God's people is headed toward a glorious future, in which all kinds of people will come to know the Lord and join his people. It is part of the dignity of God's people that, in God's mysterious wisdom, their personal faithfulness contributes to the story getting to its goal. The Messiah, the ultimate heir of David, will lead his people in the great task of bringing light to the Gentiles.

### History of Salvation Summary

Throughout history God has been fashioning a people for himself who will love and obey him, and who will express and nourish their corporate life in gathered worship. The Psalms served as a vehicle for the prayers and praises of God's people in Israel, and Christians today, who have been grafted into the olive tree of God's ancient people (Romans 11:17 and 11:24), can join their voices together with these ancient people in their worship. There are indeed adjustments to be made, now that Jesus has died and risen, and yet Gentile believers in Jesus may rejoice with the people of God of all ages.

### Musical Terms

There are several Hebrew words and phrases in the Psalms, such as 'Selah', 'The Sheminith', and 'Shiggaion', whose exact meaning is uncertain, which is why the translators have simply transliterated them, as any attempt to translate would be misleading. In some cases these may be things like names of tunes or chant styles.

### Curses in the Psalms

Many psalms call on God for help as the faithful are threatened with harm from enemies, often referred to as 'the wicked', frequently the unfaithful who persecute the godly, and sometimes Gentile oppressors. In a number of places, the requested help is that God would punish these enemies. Christians, with the teaching and example of Jesus, in passages like Matthew 5:38-48, Luke 23:34 and 1 Peter 2:19-23, may wonder what to make of such curses: How can it possibly be right for God's people to pray in this way? Many have supposed that this is an area in which the ethics of the NT improve upon and supersede the OT. Others suggest that these only apply to the church's warfare with its ultimate enemy Satan and his demons. Neither of these is fully satisfying, both because the NT authors portray themselves as heirs of OT ethics, as confirmed in Matthew 22:34-40, and because the NT has some curses of its own, e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:22, Galatians 1:8-9 and Revelation 6:9-10, even finding instruction in some of the Psalms' curses, e.g. Acts 1:20 and Romans 11:9-10, using Psalms 69 and 109. Each of the psalm

passages must be taken on its own, and the comments address these questions. At the same time, some general principles will help in understanding these passages.

First, one must be clear that the people being cursed are not enemies over trivial matters; they are people who hate the faithful precisely for their faith; they mock God and use ruthless and deceitful means to suppress the godly.

Second, it is worth remembering that these curses are in poetic form and can employ extravagant and vigorous expressions. The exact fulfilment is left to God.

Third, these curses are expressions of moral indignation, not of personal vengeance. For someone who knows God, it is unbearably wrong that those who persecute the faithful and turn people away from God should get away with it, and even seem to prosper. Zion is the city of God, the focus of his affection, as confirmed in Psalms 48 and 122; it is unthinkable that God could tolerate cruel men taking delight in destroying it. These psalms are prayers for God to vindicate himself, displaying his righteousness for all the world to see, as confirmed in 10:17-18. Further, these are prayers that God will do what he said he will do: 35:5 looks back to 1:4, and even 137:9 has Isaiah 13:16 as its backdrop. Most of these prayers assume that the persecutors will not repent; however, in one place (Psalm 83:17), the prayer actually looks to the punishment as leading to their conversion.

Fourth, the OT ethical system forbids personal revenge, e.g. Leviticus 19:17-18, Proverbs 24:17 and 25:21-22, a prohibition that the NT inherits, as confirmed in Romans 12:19-21.

Thus, when the NT writers employ these curses or formulate their own, they are following the OT guidelines. Any prayer for the Lord to hasten his coming must mean disaster for the impenitent (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). Yet Christians must keep as their deepest desire, even for those who mean harm to the church, that others would come to trust in Christ and love his people, as confirmed in Luke 23:34, Romans 9:1-3, 10:1, 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9. Hence, when they pray for God to protect his people against their persecutors, they should be explicit about asking God to lead such people to repentance. With these things in mind then, it is still possible that the faithful today might sing or read aloud even these sections of the Psalms, if it takes place in a service of worship, under wise leadership, for the good of the whole people of God.

### The Psalms as Scripture

The OT certainly presents the Psalms as part of God's inspired Word: 1 Chronicles 25:1-6 says that a number of sanctuary personnel 'prophesied', and that one was a 'seer', a synonym for a prophet. Some of these men appear as authors of canonical psalms. It is important to clarify just how the psalms are to function for the people of God.

Their primary function has already been mentioned: the Psalter is the songbook of the people of God in their gathered worship. These songs cover a wide range of experiences and emotions, and give God's people the words to express these emotions and to bring these experiences before God. At the same time, the psalms do not simply express emotions: when sung in faith, they actually shape the emotions of the godly. The emotions are therefore not a problem to be solved but are part of the raw material of now-fallen humanity that can be shaped to good and noble ends. The psalms, as songs, act deeply on the emotions, for the good of God's people. It is not natural to trust God in hardship, and yet the Psalms provide a way of doing just that, and enable the singers to trust better as a result of singing them. A person staring at the night sky might not know quite what to do with the mixed fear and wonder he finds in himself, and singing Psalm 8 will enrich his ability to respond.

The Psalms also provide guidance in the approach to worship: at times they offer content that is difficult to digest, calling on God's people to use their minds as well as their hearts and voices. They show profound respect for God as well as uninhibited delight in him. They enable the whole congregation to take upon themselves, to own, the troubles and victories of the individual members, so that everyone can: **<<rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep>>** (Romans 12:15). They enable God's people more fully to enjoy being under his care, and to want more keenly to be pure and holy, seeing purity and holiness as part of God's fatherly gift rather than as a burden.

David is the author of about half the Psalms. His role as king over Israel was more than that of a ruler, and more than that of an inspired author. The king was to represent and even embody the people, and the well-being of the whole people was tied to the faithfulness of the king. As a representative, the king was to aim to be the ideal Israelite. David, then, writes as a representative, and the readers must discern whether the emphasis of the psalm is more on his role as ruler, which he does not share with 'ordinary' Israelites, or more on his role as ideal Israelite, in which he is an example for all. Most of the historical occasions in the psalm titles allow the reader to appreciate the way in which exemplary faith meets concrete situations, and then to apply that faith to features of his or her own situation that are analogous to those in the psalm.

These comments reflect the conviction that Christians are the heirs of the ancient people of God. Much has changed: the final heir of David has arrived and taken his throne (Romans 1:4), and the people of God are no longer defined as a particular nation. The sacrifice of Jesus has radically altered the way that Christians look at the Levitical system. And yet Paul can include Gentile Christians as heirs of Abraham (Romans 4:11-12), and ask Gentile Christians to think of the OT people as their 'ancestors' (1 Corinthians 10:1). Therefore a large portion of these functions of the Psalms already mentioned still apply to Christians. These comments include

suggestions as to how Christians might employ the psalms, making the necessary changes for application to their own lives.

Christians have generally used the Psalms in their worship, as confirmed in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, even though they have not agreed on whether they may use only canonical psalms. That topic goes far beyond this discussion; it will be enough to say that all Christians would profit from a more deliberate effort to use the Psalms in their worship.

### Literary Features

As already mentioned, the Book of Psalms is an anthology of individual poems. It is important to remember that these are poems to be sung, and thus are to be read differently than say a doctrinal or ethical treatise. Because the content of these songs is expressed in a poetic idiom, readers need to be ready to interpret such staples of poetry as image, metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and apostrophe. All of these factors contribute to the rhetoric of a psalm, the way it enables the singers to own the psalm's view of the world, and how it shapes their emotional structure so that they can 'lean into' the world in a godly manner. Refer also to the Supplementary Material on the web site.

Guiding principles for reading the psalms include the following: The individual psalms should first be read as self-contained compositions. Sometimes it is helpful to see them as part of an ongoing sequence, e.g. Psalms 111-112. Further, within a particular psalm, the author does not always spell out his flow of thought; one must use a disciplined imagination to follow the connections. Finally, readers must begin with the premise that poets present their material in images rather than abstractions, and that they prefer the figurative or non-literal to the literal. All of the Psalms are written in the verse form of parallelism.

Scholars have tended to identify psalms according to their types: praise, lament, etc. Unfortunately, scholars vary in their list of types, and it is easy to multiply categories to account for the particularities of each psalm, and soon one can end up with 150 categories! Nevertheless, used reasonably, this approach can shed light on the different purposes of the various psalms. The basic categories include:

- Laments, whose primary function is to lay a troubled situation before the Lord, asking him for help. There are community laments, dealing with trouble faced by the people of God as a whole, e.g. Psalm 12, and individual laments, where the troubles face a particular member of the people, e.g. Psalm 13. This category is the largest by far, including as much as a third of the whole Psalter.
- Hymns of praise, whose primary goal is to call and enable God's people to admire God's great attributes and deeds. These can focus, for example, on a particular set of attributes, e.g. on God's benevolence in Psalm 145, on God's

universal kingship over his creation, e.g. Psalm 93, or on God's works of creation, e.g. Psalm 8.

- *Hymns of thanksgiving*, which thank God for his answer to a petition; sometimes the petition can be identified as one of the lament psalms. Like laments, there are community, e.g. Psalm 9, and individual thanksgiving psalms, e.g. Psalm 30.
- *Hymns celebrating God's law*, which speak of the wonders of the Law of Moses and help worshipers to aspire to obey it more fully, e.g. Psalm 119.
- *Wisdom psalms*, which take themes from the Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, and make them the topic of song, e.g. Psalms 1 and 37.
- *Songs of confidence*, which enable worshipers to deepen their trust in God through all manner of difficult circumstances, e.g. Psalm 23.
- *Royal psalms*, which are concerned with the Davidic monarchy as the vehicle of blessing for the people of God. Some of these are prayers, e.g. Psalm 20; some are thanksgivings, e.g. Psalm 21. All relate to the Messiah, the ultimate heir of David, either by setting a pattern (Psalms 20-21), or by portraying the king's reign in such a way that only the Messiah can completely fulfil it, e.g. Psalms 2 and 72, or by focusing primarily on the future aspect, e.g. Psalm 110.
- *Historical psalms*, which take a lesson from the history of God's dealings with his people; these are generally corporate in their focus, e.g. Psalm 78.
- *Prophetic hymns*, which echo themes found in the Prophets, especially calling the people to covenant faithfulness, e.g. Psalm 81.

There are other elements in the psalms, such as penitence, claims of innocence, yearning for God, and curses or imprecations. There are psalms that seem to have been written for specific liturgical occasions, e.g. Psalm 24, and possibly Psalms 68 and 118. There are groups of psalms, such as the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118) and Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134). Further, a psalm may fit mostly in one category, but that does not mean that elements of another category cannot also appear.

### Structure

The most basic structure of the Psalter is the easiest to see: it is a collection of 150 separate songs. It is possible that Psalms 42-43 are really two parts of one combined song, and Psalms 9-10 are companions, although not part of the same psalm.

The standard Hebrew text divides the Psalms into five books, perhaps in imitation of the five books of the Pentateuch. The psalm that ends each book finishes with a

doxology, and Psalm 150 as a whole is the conclusion both of Book 5 and of the entire Psalter.

### **Book 1 - Psalms 1-41**

Psalms 1-2 have no titles that attribute authorship; however, see Acts 4:25 for Psalm 2. They provide an introduction to the Psalms as a whole. The remainder of Book 1 is made up almost entirely of psalms of David: only Psalms 10 and 33 lack a Davidic superscription. Prayers issuing from a situation of distress dominate, punctuated by statements of confidence in the God who alone can save, striking the note that concludes the book (40-41). Reflections on ethics and worship with integrity are found in Psalms 1, 14-15, 19, 24 and 26.

### **Book 2 - Psalms 42-72**

From the Davidic voice of Book 1, Book 2 introduces the first Korah collection (42-49, although 43 lacks a superscription), with a single Asaph psalm at Psalm 50. A further Davidic collection is found in Psalms 51-65 and 68-69, including the bulk of the historical superscriptions (51-52, 54, 56-57, 59-60 and 63). Once again, lament and distress dominate the content of these prayers, which now also include a communal voice, e.g. Psalm 44, as confirmed in Psalms 67 and 68. The lone psalm attributed to Solomon concludes Book 2 with the Psalms' pinnacle of royal theology (72, as confirmed in 45).

### **Book 3 - Psalms 73-89**

The tone darkens further in Book 3. The opening Psalm 73 starkly questions the justice of God before seeing light in God's presence; that light has almost escaped the psalmist in Psalm 88, the bleakest of all psalms. Book 2 ended with the high point of royal aspirations; Book 3 concludes in Psalm 89 with these expectations badly threatened. Sharp rays of hope occasionally pierce the darkness (e.g. Psalms 75, 85 and 87). The brief third book contains most of the psalms of Asaph (Psalms 73-83), as well as another set of Korah psalms (Psalms 84-85 and 87-88).

### **Book 4 - Psalms 90-106**

Psalm 90 opens the fourth book of the psalms. It may be seen as the first response to the problems raised by the third book (Psalms 73-89). Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, reminds the worshiper that God was active on Israel's behalf long before David. This theme is taken up in Psalms 103-106, which summarise God's dealings with his people before any kings reigned. In between there is a group of psalms (93-100) characterised by the refrain 'The Lord reigns'. This truth refutes the doubts of Psalm 89.

## Book 5 - Psalms 107-150

The structure of Book 5 reflects the closing petition of Book 4 in 106:47. It declares that God does answer prayer (Psalm 107) and concludes with five Hallelujah psalms (146-150). In between there are several psalms affirming the validity of the promises to David (Psalms 110, 132 and 144), two collections of Davidic psalms (108-110 and 138-145); the longest psalm, celebrating the value of the law (Psalm 119); and 15 psalms of ascent for use by pilgrims to Jerusalem (Psalms 120-134).

There are other evidences of editorial arrangement: e.g. Psalms 1-2 form the doorway into the whole Psalter; Psalms 111-112 illuminate each other; and some affinity groupings of psalms celebrating God's universal kingship (Psalms 93 and 95-99), historical psalms, e.g. Psalms 104-107, the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118), the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134), and the final Hallelujah Psalms (Psalms 146-150). There appear to be other factors that have led to psalms being grouped together, as the comments observe.

However, the question of whether there is an overarching scheme that governs all 150 psalms remains a recurring topic in scholarly discussion. It is entirely possible that those who compiled the Psalter arranged the individual psalms to address the concerns of their age. The difficulty is that many structural schemes have been proposed but none has won universal agreement, nor does any of them seem fully persuasive, therefore no overall outline of the book has been included here. However, the absence of an overall structural scheme is no surprise when dealing with a songbook, which is what the Psalter is.