

The Book of Psalms

I. The Nature of the Book of Psalms

A. The name.

1. "Psalms" is from the Greek title denoting songs adapted to music on stringed instruments. Its title in the original Hebrew simply meant "praises," denoting the general theme of the Psalms.
2. "In Hebrew this book was called 'Praises,' 'Book of Praises,' or 'Prayers.' Later it became known as the 'Book of Psalms.' In the New Testament it is called by this name by our Lord (Luke 24:44), by Paul (Acts 13:38), and by Luke (Luke 20:42) This name was used by those who produced the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament..." (William S. Deal, *Baker's Pictorial Introduction to the Bible*, 143).
3. "The book of Psalms was gradually collected and came to be known as the Sepher Tehillim ('Book of Praises'), because almost every psalm contains some note of praise to God. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) uses this Greek term Psalmoi as a title for this book, meaning poems sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments, and this word is the basis for the English terms 'psalter' and 'psalm'" (Nelson's *Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, 175).

B. The character of the book.

1. "The book of Psalms is the largest and perhaps the most widely used book in the Bible. It explores the full range of human experiences in a very personal and practical way. Written over a lengthy period of Israel's history, the tremendous breadth of subject matter in the Psalms includes topics such as jubilation, war, peace, worship, judgment, messianic prophecy, praise, and lament. The Psalms were set to the accompaniment of stringed instruments and served as the temple hymnbook and devotional guide for the Jewish people...
"The psalms were originally individual poems. With the passing of time these were collected to form smaller books and the book of Psalms in its present form comprises five of these smaller books" (Nelson's, *ibid.*).
2. "The Psalms are mostly lyrical poetry, that is, poetry adapted to the harp or lyre; to be used in connection with instrumental music; to be sung not read...Lyric poetry is, for the most part, an expression of deep feeling, and has its foundation in feeling or emotion...the authors of that poetry were inspired to prepare and transmit to future times that which, in all ages, would express the feelings of true devotion, and which might be permanently employed in the praises of God" (Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes on the Old Testament, Psalms Vol. I*, xix-xxi).
3. "While most of the Bible is God's voice calling to His creatures, the book of Psalms is mankind's voice raised to the Lord. As the various writers expressed their personal feelings, desires, and needs, the Spirit of God led them to strike the chords of sensitive hearts universally" (Rubel Shelly, *A Book-by-Book Study of the Old Testament*, 78).

- a. Someone has suggested the five books of the Psalms are really a tribute to the five books of Moses (Genesis - Deuteronomy), the Pentateuch. The law is the five-fold book of God to His people while the Psalms respond by being the five-fold book of the people to God.
 - 1) Book 1 (Psa. 1-41). Corresponds with Genesis having much to say about man.
 - 2) Book 2 (Psa. 42-72). Corresponds with Exodus having much to say about redemption.
 - 3) Book 3 (Psa. 73-89). Corresponds with Leviticus and emphasizes worship.
 - 4) Book 4 (Psa. 90-106). Begins with the psalm of Moses and corresponds with Numbers stressing wandering.
 - 5) Book 5 (Psa. 107-150). Corresponds with Deuteronomy and offers thanksgiving for the Divine faithfulness with emphasis on the the word of God. Psalm 119, the longest of all the psalms, has as its theme "the word of the Lord."
- b. "Perhaps the central thought of this book of praise is 95:6-7. 'O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God; and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand'" (Johnny Ramsey, *The Book of Psalms*, 3).
- 4. "Through the ages, man has found in poetry a means of expressing the deepest, most profound, and intensive feelings of the human heart. In the Psalms the Hebrew poets expressed these emotions for themselves and for the nation...when we read them we find that they expressed them for ourselves as well...In the Psalms one finds expressed the eager yearning and longing for God's presence; prayers and songs of joyous trust and praise; cries of burning complaints and bitterness against and toward enemies; times of doubt and despair; yet throughout all experiences which produced these emotions, there is dependance on God. To appreciate the Psalms, one must enter into and share the spirit of the Psalmist" (Homer Hailey, *Bible Class Notes - The Psalms*, 1).

II. The Author

- A. The book of Psalms is a compilation of the songs of various Hebrew authors including, according to the superscriptions heading many of the psalms, Moses (90), Asaph (50, 73-83), Sons of Korah (42; 44-49; 84-85; 87-88), Heman the Ezrahite (88), Ethan the Ezra-hite (89), Solomon (72; 127), and David (writer of at least 73 of the psalms) while the rest are anonymous.
- B. The book is commonly referred to as belonging to David because he wrote about half of the psalms.
 - 1. The headings attribute 73 to him but he probably wrote more (cf. Psalm 2 with Acts 4:25-26 and Psalms 105 and 96 with 1 Chron. 16:7-36).
 - 2. He is known as "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1; cf. also 1 Sam. 16:18; 2 Sam. 6:5,15; 2 Chron. 7:6; 29:25; Amos 6:5).

3. He arranged the temple song service (1 Chron. 25) and also commissioned men including Asaph, Ethan, Heman and Jeduthun, to compose songs for the temple worship (1 Chron. 15:19; 16:4-6; 25:1; cf. Kings 4:31; 1 Chron. 2:6; 26:1).
- C. "No other book of the Bible has as many different authors as does Psalms. Seventy-three psalms are attributed to David in the superscriptions, and an additional two, Psalms 2 and 95, are ascribed to David in the New Testament. In addition to the seventy-five by David, twelve are ascribed to Asaph, a priest who headed the service of music. Ten were by the sons of Korah, a guild of singers and composers, and other psalms are ascribed to Solomon, Moses, Heman the Ezrahite and Ethan the Ezrahite. Fifty of the psalms are anonymous, although some of these are traditionally ascribed to Ezra" (*Nelson's*, 175).

III. The Date

- A. "The Psalms were written over a long period of time, perhaps 600 years" (*The Shaw Pocket Bible Handbook*, 196).
- B. "The time covered by Psalms is a long span. They reach from the days of Moses in the wilderness to the days of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. While the range of writing extends over many hundreds of years, it is remarkable how little variation there is in the general expressions of the writers and the truths they taught" (Deal, 143).
- C. "The earliest individual psalm is probably that of Moses (Ps. 90); the latest is probably Psalm 137, which could not have been written before the sixth century B.C. Though many of the psalms were written and collected during the Davidic era, or shortly thereafter, the final compilation of Psalms was probably not complete until the latter half of the fifth century B.C. during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (450-425 B.C.)" (*Nelson's*, 175, 177).

IV. Characteristics of the Book of Psalms

- A. Five divisions. The book of Psalms is a collection of five smaller books of songs each of which ends with a doxology—a hymn of praise to God.
 1. The divisions are as follows:
 - a. Book I: Psalms 1-41.
 - b. Book II: Psalms 42-72.
 - c. Book III: Psalms 73-89.
 - d. Book IV: Psalms 90-106.
 - e. Book V: Psalms 107-150.
 2. "The book is divided in the Hebrew into five minor books or collections, sufficiently marked in their character, and so indicated at the close of each as to make it every way probable that these may have been published, so to speak, in the form of different books, or that the latter were additions to the first collection or volume" (Barnes, xiii-xiv).
 3. G. Campbell Morgan believes the key to the content of each division or book is found in the closing doxologies "and an examination of these will reveal a certain conception of God, and an attitude of the soul in worship resulting from such a conception" (*Notes on the Psalms*, 9-10).

B. Psalm headings.

1. Many of the psalms have superscriptions before the actual poetry which have generated much debate over their origin and authenticity.
2. Although not inspired, they are undoubtedly of ancient origin because they were in existence when the Septuagint (Greek) Version of the Old Testament was translated (280-180 B.C.). By that time many of the words concerning the musical score and musical instruments were unknown, implying a much earlier source.
3. These headings indicate:
 - a. Authorship.
 - b. Occasion of the psalm (cf. 34; 51; 52; etc.).
 - c. Their intended use (cf. 30; 92; etc.).
 - d. The type of psalm—a prayer, meditation, etc. (cf. 32; 42-45; etc.).
 - e. Musical instructions.
 - 1) To the choir director.
 - 2) The tune to which the psalm was to be played (cf. 22; 56-57 ; etc.).
 - 3) The musical instruments to use in accompaniment (cf. 4; 5; 6; 8; 54-55; 81; etc.).

V. Types of Psalms

- A. Individual and communal lament psalms, or prayers for God's deliverance (3-7; 12; 13; 22; 25-28; 35; 38-40; 42-44; 51; 54-57; 59-61; 63; 64; 69-71; 74; 79; 80; 83; 85; 86; 88; 90; 102; 109; 120; 123; 130; and 140-143).
- B. Thanksgiving psalms consisting of praise to God for His gracious acts (8; 18; 19; 29; 30; 32-34; 36; 40; 41; 66; 103-106; 111; 113; 116; 117; 124; 129; 135; 136; 138; 139; 146-148; and 150).
- C. Enthronement psalms which describe God's sovereign rule (47; 93; and 96-99).
- D. Pilgrimage psalms which were sung by worshipers as they traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festivals (43; 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; and 120-134).
- E. Royal psalms which portray the reign of the earthly king as well as of the heavenly king of Israel (2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132; and 144).
- F. Wisdom psalms which instruct the worshiper in the way of wisdom and righteousness (1; 37; and 119).
- G. Imprecatory psalms in which the worshiper invokes God's wrath and judgment against His enemies (7; 35; 40; 55; 58; 59; 69; 79; 109; 137; 139; and 144).
- H. Messianic psalms.
 1. Many of the psalms specifically anticipate the life and ministry of Jesus who came centuries later as the promised Messiah.
 2. "Next to Isaiah, the Book of Psalms is the most expressive of the Messianic prophecies and message in the Old Testament. The light of the covenant, to be fulfilled in the coming Messiah, here shines with an extra brilliance" (Deal, 147).
 3. The Messianic prophecies in the psalms take a variety of forms and refer to Christ in a variety of ways.
 - a. Typical Messianic. The subject of the psalm is in some respects a type of Christ (34:20; 69:4,9).

- b. Typical Prophetic. Language is used which describes the psalmist's present experience but which points beyond his own life and becomes historically true only in Christ (22).
- c. Indirectly Messianic. At the time of the psalm's composition, it referred to a king or the house of David in general but it awaited final fulfillment in Christ (2; 45; 72).
- d. Purely Prophetic. Refers solely to Christ without reference to any other son of David (110).
- e. Enthronement. Anticipates the coming of God and the consummation of His kingdom in the person of Jesus Christ (96-99).

VI. The Uses of the Book of Psalms

A. The Jews.

1. The psalms were originally designed to be a hymnal for use in the temple and synagogue worship.
 - a. Musicians were provided to worship God in the temple and the psalms were composed to be used there.
 - b. The book of Psalms became a manual and guide for the devotional life of the Jews.
2. According to the Mishnah, certain psalms were recited on certain days of the week in the temple: "The following are the Psalms that were chanted in the Temple. On the first day, they used to say, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein' (Psalm 24). On the second day, they used to say, 'Great is the Lord and highly to be praised, in the city of our God, His Holy mountain' (Psalm 48). On the third day, they used to say, 'God standeth in the congregation of God, in the midst of the judges He judgeth' (Psalm 82). On the fourth day, they used to say, 'O Lord, Thou God to whom vengeance belongeth, shine forth' (Psalm 94). On the fifth day, they used to say, 'Sing aloud unto God our strength, shout aloud to the God of Jacob' (Psalm 81). On the sixth day, they used to say, 'A Psalm. A song for the sabbath day (Psalm 92). A Psalm, a song for the time to come, for the day that will be all sabbath and rest for everlasting life' (via "Interesting Facts About The Book Of Psalms," Stuart Dauermann, *Jews for Jesus Newsletter*).

B. First century Christians.

1. The early church recognized the value of the psalms in praising God and expressing their faith and trust in Him and used them in their public worship (cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Jas. 5:13).
2. "After Jesus had instituted the Lord's Supper, he and the Twelve sang a hymn (Matthew 26:30). This consisted of the latter half of the Hallel (or Hallelujah) psalms (Psalms 115-118), which the Jews sang after eating the Passover meal" (John T. Willis, *The Way of Life Series: Insights from the Psalms*, Vol. I, 1).
3. "Christ's favorite Old Testament section must have been Psalms because He quoted from it more often than any other book!" (Ramsey, 3).

4. "That Psalms was a favorite book of the first-century believers is shown by the fact that of the New Testament's 283 direct quotations from the Old Testament, 116 are from Psalms" (Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament*, 272).
- C. Christians today.
1. It is important to remember that the psalms were also written for our benefit (Rom. 15:3-4; cf. Ps. 69:9).
 2. "The book of Psalms is a record of deep religious experience...It is the guide of young believers; and it becomes more and more the companion, the comforter and the counsellor, as the believer moves along through the varied scenes of life, and as grey hairs come upon him, and as the infirmities, which pre-intimate the approaching close of all things, press him down" (Barnes, xlii).
 3. "In these busy days, it would be greatly to the spiritual profit of Christian men if they were more familiar with the Book of Psalms, in which they would find a complete armoury for life's battle, and a perfect supply for life's needs. Here we have both delight and usefulness, consolation and instruction. For every condition there is a Psalm, suitable and elevating. The Book supplies the babe in grace with penitent cries, and the perfected saint with triumphant songs...He who is acquainted with the marches of the Psalm-country knows that the land floweth with milk and honey, and he delights to travel therein" (Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, Vol. 6; preface).

VII. Some Teachings Found in the Book of Psalms

- A. "Underlying the psalmist's outlook is the concept of the power of God. God is in control of this universe. Although it may appear at times that things have gotten out of hand, this is not so. God is beyond our knowing, but we are not beyond his power...
- "God's providence, or effective working, is also prominent in the book. He works like a master craftsman, weaving his will in and out of our free choices, so that in the end we have a blend of divine and human activity. Indeed, he works in our free choices as well, accomplishing his own good purposes...
- "The tenderness of God is constantly emphasized. Like a father who pities his children, or a hen who gathers her chicks under her wings, so God deals with us...
- "God is also depicted as just. No wrongs will go unrighted. No evil done to God's people is unseen. In due time, all will be made right...
- "The proper response of God's people is also evident. We are to live lives of prayer, praise, humility, thanksgiving, and faith...
- "The beauty of the world, the value of life, the goodness of the natural order, and the sheer joy of living are also described. From the grass that grows beneath our feet to the loftiest thoughts in our heads or the highest stars in the sky, the majesty that God wrote into the world is undeniable" (*Shaw's*, 197-198).
- B. "1. The Psalms furnish mankind, especially those who love God, with a sort of emotional guidance. They plumb the depths of man's nature and bring up almost every color of feeling and expression. They serve as a guide in the emotional patterns much as other portions of Scripture do for faith and actions...

"2. The Psalms also abound in devotional warmth and energy. One can always find there the inspiration for deep meditation, high resolve, and the finest of noble ambitions. No other portion of the Scriptures is so filled with devotional materials and expressions as this book...

"3. In the Psalms there are little additions to great historical facts—for instance, that of Joseph being bound in fetters while in prison and being tried by God's word (105:17,18). Apparently the rock from which Moses got water in the wilderness was a 'flint' rock (114: 8)...

"4. Another great area is the deep psychological insight into the nature of mankind... Almost every psychological problem in normal life may be found in the Psalms...

"5. Every great doctrine in the Bible is either taught, expressed, or implied in the Psalms. Such basic doctrines as sin, atonement (by sacrifice), guilt, forgiveness, justification, restoration, repentance, confession, cleansing from sin...faith, and the mercy of God are found in this great fountain of truth...

"6. Every attribute or characteristic of God as the Divine Being is found here. The moral attributes of holiness, justice, mercy, truth, goodness, and righteousness, as well as the personal attributes of eternity of being, spirituality, omnipotence (all-powerfulness), omniscience (infinite knowledge), omnipresence (presence everywhere), immutability (unchangeableness) are ascribed to God in many places.

"7. Every phase of religious experience is either described or anticipated in the Psalms. Such experiences as sin, guilt, repentance, confession, forgiveness, cleansing, restoration, faith, joy, peace, grace, hope, love...are all found in abundance" (Deal, 148-149).

VIII. Psalms and the New Testament

- A. There are 116 direct quotations from the Psalms in the New Testament.
- B. Many Messianic prophecies from the Psalms find their fulfillment in the New Testament.
 1. The Son of God (2:7; Matt. 3:17).
 2. Praised by children (8:2; Matt. 21:15-16).
 3. Ruler of all (8:6; Heb. 2:8).
 4. Rises from death (16:10; Matt. 28:7).
 5. Forsaken by God (22:1; Matt. 27:46).
 6. Derided by enemies (22:7-8; Luke 23:35).
 7. Hands and feet pierced (22:16; John 20:27).
 8. Lots cast for clothes (22:18; Matt. 27:35-36).
 9. Bones unbroken (34:20; John 19:32-33,36).
 10. Accused by false witnesses (35:11; Mark 14:57).
 11. Hated without cause (35:19; John 15:25).
 12. Delights in God's will (40:7-8; Heb. 10:7).
 13. Betrayed by a friend (41:9; Luke 22:47).
 14. The eternal King (45:6; Heb. 1:8).

15. Ascends to heaven (68:18; Acts 1:9-11).
16. Zealous for God's house (69:9; John 2:17).
17. Given vinegar and gall (69:21; Matt. 27:34).
18. Prays for enemies (109:4; Luke 23:34).
19. His betrayer replaced (109:8; Acts 1:20).
20. Rules over His enemies (110:1; Matt. 22:44).
21. A priest forever (110:4; Heb. 5:6).
22. The chief stone of God's building (118:22; Matt. 21:42).
23. Comes in the name of the Lord (118:26; Matt. 21:9).