
Bible Study for January 9, 2019: The Organization and Structure of the Psalms

Introduction

The word “Psalm” comes from the Greek word *psalmoi*. It suggests the idea of a “praise song.” At first, because of the wide variety of these songs, this praise book was unnamed, but eventually the ancient Hebrews called it “The Book of Praises,” or simply “Praises,” and is essentially the hymnbook for ancient Israel. Many of the psalms were to be sung and recited at festive occasions. Many musical terms are cited within the text of Psalms including strings, octaves, choir, sopranos, lightly, cello/lute, stringed instrument, flute, vibrate, lyre, crescendo, pause, etc. Another name for the Book of Psalms is “the Psalter.”

It is a collection of 150 lyric poems that arise out of experiences with which we can all identify. It provides instruction, inspiration, motivation, and consolation, and has been so popular because they arise out of the experiences which with many people can identify. It is very difficult to find any circumstance in life that does not find expression in some psalm or another. Some arose out of prosperity, others out of adversity. Some psalms deal with holiness and others with sinfulness. Some are laments that bewail the worst of situations whereas others are triumphant hymns of joy and thanksgiving. Some look back to the past while others look forward to the future. The psalms are great because their writers composed them out of their most profound experiences. Religious lyric poetry reflects the inner feelings of the person whose soul is stirred by thoughts of God. The Psalms are thus inspired responses of various individuals to God’s revelation of himself in the Old Testament era. The Psalms was a long-term project that was approximately one thousand years in the making, from 1400BC-400BC, requiring more time for its writing than all the canonical books.

The Purpose of the Psalms

- To **express** the divine word spoken IN rather than TO man.
- To **reveal** the character of God through the praise, complaint and exhortation of God’s people so that the reader may be willing to submit to the Lord.
- To **enable** the reader to come into contact with God through the expression of the common, subjective daily experiences of others.
- To **encourage** one’s confidence in God’s faithfulness by the words of others when one’s own life experiences do not seem to support that faith.
- To **affirm** the certainty of God’s future rule on earth through the line of David wherein the righteous will be blessed and the wicked will be judged.
- To **provide** a worship hymnal and a devotional guide for the Temple-centered Jewish faith.
- To **encourage** believers to enjoy God and His benefits.

Human Authors

Psalms is written by more authors than any other book in the Bible. It is a literary collection from many men such as David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, Moses, Heman, Ethan, and others.

- **David**, the second king of Israel and “sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1), is the chief author of the Psalms. He is directly credited with writing 73 of the psalms, but the New Testament affirms his authorship of 2 more. Thus he wrote 75 of the 150 psalms, which is exactly half the Psalms (3-9; 11-32; 34-41; 51-65; 68-70; 86; 101; 103; 108-110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138-145. Psalm 2 is identified by Acts 4:25 as being written by David, as is Psalm 95 by Hebrews 4:7).
- **Asaph**, a priest who served as the worship leader of ancient Israel, wrote twelve psalms (Ps. 50; 73-83).
- **The sons of Korah**, a guild of singers and composers of music, are credited with writing ten psalms (Pss. 42; 44-49; 84-85; 87).

- **Solomon**, David's son, the third king of Israel, accounted for two psalms (Pss. 72; 127).
- **Moses**, the great leader of Israel and the Exodus, wrote one psalm (Ps. 90).
- **Heman**, a wise man, musician, an Ezrahite, a son of Korah, and founder of the Korahite choir (2 Chr. 5:12; 35:15), wrote one psalm (Ps. 88).
- **Ethan**, a wise man and Ezrahite, probably a Levitical singer (1 Chr. 6:42; 15:17,19), wrote one psalm (Ps. 89).
- **Anonymous authors** account for the remaining forty-eight psalms.
- **Ezra**, scribe and priest of Israel, is thought to be the author of some of the anonymous psalms.

Time Period for Writing

Because many different authors wrote the Psalms, the writing of these sacred songs occurred at different times and, as previously mentioned, span a period of about one thousand years. The time of their writing reaches from approximately 1410 B.C., when the first psalm was written, to around 430 B.C., when the last psalm was written (depending upon the identity of the author of Psalm 126).

- The first psalm written, Psalm 90, was composed by Moses during Israel's forty years of wilderness wanderings (1445-1405 B.C.), probably toward the end of this time of severe testing, perhaps around 1410 B.C.
- The vast majority of the psalms were written during the kingly reigns of David (c. 1010-970 B.C.) and Solomon (c.970-930 B.C.).
- The last psalm composed, Psalm 126, is thought to have been recorded after the time of Israel's Babylonian exile, during their return to the land of Judah, around 500 B.C., or even later, about 430 B.C., if Psalm 126 was written by Ezra.

Themes

It is very difficult to classify the Psalms according to theme, but the following is a rough approximation which may be helpful.

Wisdom psalms.

- These instructive psalms provide practical guidelines for godly living and give direction for righteous living in the pursuit of God's will (Pss. 1; 37; 119).

Royal psalms.

- Describing the coming messianic rule of the Christ, these regal psalms portray him as the undisputed sovereign King over heaven and earth (Pss.2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 47; 68; 72; 89; 101; 110; 118; 132; 144).

Lament psalms.

- These highly emotionally charged psalms record the writer's heart cry to God for divine deliverance from trouble and pain (Pss. 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; 140-143).

Imprecatory psalms.

- Motivated by fiery zeal for God's glory, these provocative, and often controversial, psalms invoke God's wrath and judgment upon the psalmist's adversaries who were God's enemies. The psalmist called upon the Lord to punish the wicked and defend him as he carries out God's work in the midst of his persecutors (Pss. 7; 35; 40; 55; 58-59; 69; 79; 109; 137; 139; 144).

Thanksgiving/Praise psalms.

- These psalms express a profound awareness of deep gratitude for God's abundant blessings, whether individual or national (Pss. 8; 18; 19; 29; 30; 32-34; 36; 40; 41; 66; 103-106; 111; 113; 117; 124; 129; 135-136; 138-139; 146-148; 150).

Pilgrimage psalms.

- These festive psalms foster celebration and praise for God as Israel recalled the Lord's goodness to them as they traveled to Jerusalem for their annual feasts (Pss. 43; 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 120-134).

Enthronement psalms.

- These awe inspiring majestic psalms describe the majesty of God’s sovereign rule over all his creation and the providential care by which he sustains, controls, and directs all he has made (Pss. 48; 93; 96-99).

Book Divisions

The Book of Psalms was originally collected by ancient compilers as a series of smaller books in which the next book augmented the previous material. Psalm 72:20 makes this clear when it states, “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.” This verse, no doubt, marked the end of an earlier, smaller edition of the Psalms which once concluded at this point, but later was supplemented with Psalms 73-150.

The five books of Psalms are easily recognizable because each section concludes with a climactic doxology (Pss. 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6). Some interpreters have maintained that these five books of the Psalms correspond to the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Thus, the Book of Psalms has been called “The 5 Pentateuch of David” because they are thought to mirror the books of the Law of Moses. These five divisions of the Psalms are as follows:

- Book I: Psalms 1-41. The first forty-one psalms were probably gathered together during the early days of the Jewish monarchy by either David or Solomon. Book I was basically assigned to David. This first book highlights God’s power in creation (Pss. 8; 19) and is dominated by the themes of sin and redemption, and are considered to have been written during the time of David’s conflict with Saul.
- Book II: Psalms 42-72. These thirty-one psalms were collected and assembled at a later time to form Book II, possibly three hundred years after Book I was compiled during the reign of Judah’s king, Hezekiah (c.715-686 B.C.). If so, the “men of Hezekiah,” an active Bible committee that collected many of the proverbs of Solomon (Prov. 25:1), possibly organized these psalms into a literary unit and added them to Book I. It is also possible that these psalms were collected during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Interpreters have noted that this second book of psalms focuses upon Israel’s ruin and redemption and thus, can be related to the Book of Exodus.
- Book III: Psalms 73-89. These seventeen psalms were subsequently compiled into Book III, probably during the same era by the men of Hezekiah as previously mentioned for Book II, or by Josiah, sixteenth ruler of the Southern Kingdom (640-609 B.C.). This third book begins with eleven consecutive psalms written by Asaph, a Levite who led one of the temple choirs (Pss. 73-83), and includes a few songs written by David (Pss. 86; 101; 103). These psalms center primarily upon the holiness of Israel’s sanctuary and coincides with the concern of the Book of Leviticus. Book IV: Psalms 90-106. This cluster of seventeen psalms was collected about two hundred to three hundred years later and added to the first three books, probably during the postexilic days when Israel returned to her land under Ezra (458 B.C.) and Nehemiah (445 B.C.). This division of the Psalms focuses upon Israel’s relapse and recovery in the wilderness, echoing the theme of the Book of Numbers. Appropriately, Book IV begins with Psalm 90, the only psalm written by Moses during Israel’s forty years of wilderness wanderings. This was a severe time of testing recorded in Numbers.
- Book IV. Psalms 90-106. This book contains the recurring theme of God’s sovereign kingdom which dominates the kingdoms of the nations just as Numbers documents Israel’s relationship to the surrounding nations.
- Book V: Psalms 107-150. These last forty-four psalms make up Book V. Like Book IV, they were probably collected and added to the Book of Psalms during the postexilic days of Ezra, almost six hundred years after Book I was collated. This fifth book focuses upon the sufficiency of God’s Word (Ps. 119) and the universal praise due to the Lord’s name (Pss. 146-150), much like the Book of Deuteronomy focuses on God and His Word.

Unique and Interesting Features of The Psalms

- Psalms is the only book of the Bible that isn't given chapters. Most books of the Bible were divided by chapters around 1227 A.D., but Psalms is (mostly) divided according to the original documents.
- It is the largest book of the Bible with 150 psalms.
- It contains the most chapters of any book of the Bible. Isaiah is 2nd with 66.
- Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible with 176 verses.
- Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible, containing only two verses.
- Psalm 117 is also the middle chapter of the Bible, the very center of the 1,189 chapters found in Genesis 1 through Revelation 22.
- Psalm 118:8 is the absolute center of the 31, 173 verses contained in the Scripture,
- the middle verse of the entire Bible.
- Psalm 18 is the same as 2 Samuel 22.
- Psalms is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. Of the 360 Old Testament quotations or allusions in the New Testament, 112 are from the Psalms.
- Psalms contains more messianic prophecies than any other Old Testament book, other than possibly Isaiah. It reveals the Messiah as the Son of God (Ps. 2) and son of man (Ps. 8) in his obedience (Ps. 40:6-8), betrayal (Ps. 41:9), crucifixion (Ps. 22), resurrection (Ps. 16), ascension (Ps. 68:18), and enthronement (Ps. 110).
- There are duplicate psalms: psalms 14 and 53; 40:13-17 and 70; 60:5-12 and 108.
- A number of psalms are acrostic in Hebrew with the first word of each verse or stanza beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (Pss. 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 119, 145).

Suggestions for Studying Psalms

There are at least 4 observations you will always want to make before studying and interpreting the Psalms (these observations are also useful when studying other books of the Bible)

- 1) **Who** is the Author? For the vast majority of the Psalms, the superscription above the psalm identifies the author. Keep in mind that there is some scholarly debate, as there often is, about whether the superscriptions are a part of the earliest manuscripts and contend that they were added later. These observations are good to know, but do not change the inspirational value of the texts.
- 2) **To whom** did the author write this? While it may not always be clear, knowing the audience can be helpful for understanding the text's function. Knowing that a psalm is given to the "choirmaster" lets us know that the psalm functions as a worship song. You will naturally read the psalm with a different set of expectations than if it were written in a diary by an individual who never had any audience in mind but himself and God. Knowing the audience does affect your reading. For example, when reading the New Testament, it matters whether the epistle to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians or not. (It apparently was, or the massive number of Old Testament references would be odd.)
- 3) **When** did the author write this? Knowing the date of composition helps you to understand the social, cultural, and political context within which the author is writing. You will want to consult a credible commentary to discover the date of authorship. Knowing that Psalm 44 was in all likelihood written during the Babylonian exile, or later, helps you to conceptualize some of the issues before the writer and his/her audience. This will help you understand references to "our armies" or "our enemies" from a historical perspective. Even if the psalm you're studying can't be dated with specificity (even David's psalms don't always give details about when in his life they were written), you need to place the psalm somewhere within the overall story of Scripture.
- 4) What kind of **literature** is this? Knowing that this is poetry and not a narrative, epistle, Gospel, or apocalypse affects how you read the Book of Psalms. Additionally, knowing what kind of poetry the psalm is categorized in (e.g. psalm of lament, psalm of ascent, psalm of praise, etc.) will assist in your interpretation and understanding of the literature.