

B. Overview of the Psalms

The book of Psalms consists of one hundred and fifty separate psalms or *songs* grouped together in a series of *books*. Together they span a period of time extending from the exodus from Egypt through the theocratic and monarchical periods to the post-exilic era of Ezra and Nehemiah. Originally constructed as musical songs, the Psalms were often sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments and formed the heart of Jewish worship and personal devotions. Over time the various individual psalms were collated and came to be known as *Sepher Tehillim* – the Book of Praises. This title expresses the fact that the predominant theme of the book of Psalms, woven into all of its themes, concerns and emphases, is the praise and worship of God.

1. Structure and Authorship

The Psalms are organized into five books. The books are comprised as follows:

- 1) Book One includes Psalms 1-41. Most of these psalms are attributed to David.
- 2) Book Two includes Psalms 42-72. This group includes psalms written by David, but also several attributed to the sons of Korah (42, 44-49).
- 3) Book Three consists of Psalms 73-89. Most of the psalms in this group were written by Asaph, one of the Levite singers appointed by David (73-83).
- 4) Book Four includes Psalms 90-106. Within this group is the one psalm attributed to Moses (90), though the majority of these psalms are anonymous.
- 5) Book Five consists of Psalms 107-150. David penned many of these psalms, but many are anonymous as well. In this final “book” is the remarkable Psalm 119 which represents the longest chapter in the Bible. It is a masterful portrait of God’s word set in an acrostic structure in Hebrew (cf. also Psalm 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145). Also in this final group are the great psalms of praise which round out the book (146-150).

Each of these five books ends with a doxology, or song of praise, proclaiming the blessedness of Israel’s God. For example, the final verse of Psalm 41 (which concludes Book One) ends this way: “*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.*” Psalm 150, the final psalm, serves as the fitting climactic doxology for the entire Psalter, concluding with the exclamation, “*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.*”

It is uncertain how this five-fold grouping came about. Some sources, including Jewish *Midrash* traditions, suggest that the five-fold division is based on the five books of the Pentateuch (the *Torah* in the Jewish Tanakh), but no one knows for sure. Also uncertain is the basis for the five collections and the psalms each contains. Numerous authors penned individual psalms, and their psalms are mixed throughout the various books. David is listed as the author of 73 psalms, Asaph of 12, and 11 are attributed to the sons of Korah. Other writers include Moses, Solomon, and the Ezrahites Heman and Ethan.

The earliest extant copies of the Psalms are part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating to about the first century B.C. Those copies attest the five-fold division, showing that it predates the time of Christ. Indeed, there are some thirty scrolls containing all or part of the Psalter among the Dead Sea manuscripts, showing the importance of the Psalms in Jewish life during the Second Temple period (at least life within the Dead Sea community).

- a. Of the 150 psalms contained in the Hebrew scriptures, half were composed by David, Israel's great king, poet, musician, and worship leader (cf. 1 Samuel 16:23; 1 Chronicles 15:1-25, 23:1-5; 2 Chronicles 7:1-6; Nehemiah 12:27-36). David was Israel's preeminent king and unique prototype of God's messianic ruler, and this emphasis tends to obscure his equally-important role as Israel's great *worship leader*. David was singularly "a man after God's own heart," and his devotion and unique gifting qualified him to administer Yahweh's rule over His covenant kingdom, but also to lead the sons of the kingdom in their worship of their covenant God and Father. Thus David played a central role in devising and provisioning Israel's corporate worship. As king, he assigned the ranks of musicians and singers, but he also *personally provided* for their ministrations. He designed and procured the musical instruments for the musicians to use in worship and composed the songs that the instruments accompanied.

David's kingship focused on Yahweh's worship as much as His rule, and both dimensions of his role as Israel's *shepherd* are critical to his typological significance. The messianic son God promised to him (2 Samuel 7) would embody and fully enact all that David represented: He would be a priestly king fully devoted to Israel's God, a ruler who, in every respect and degree, would be a man after the Lord's own heart. Out of his own perfect devotion as Yahweh's true son, this messianic ruler would lead His covenant household in their devotion and worship, first by his own example, and then by his instruction and provision.

- b. David made the largest contribution to the Psalter, with 75 psalms attributed to him. (He is named as the author in 73 psalms, and the New Testament ascribes Psalms 2 and 95 to him as well.) In terms of named authors, he is followed by *Asaph* (12 psalms), the *sons of Korah* (11 psalms), *Solomon* (2 psalms), *Moses*, *Heman*, and *Ethan* (one psalm each). The remaining psalms are anonymous.

Asaph was a Levite and one of the men David chose to lead Israel's singers. He, too, was a composer, and his psalms are part of his catalog of musical compositions (1 Chronicles 6:39; 2 Chronicles 29:30; Nehemiah 12:46). The *sons of Korah* were also Levites, descendants of the man who led the Levite rebellion against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness (Numbers 16). Later, Korahites were among the men who followed David (1 Chronicles 12:1-7), and he assigned them to be gatekeepers at Yahweh's sanctuary (1 Chronicles 9:17-23). David also appointed some of these Korahites to be singers together with other Levites, including *Heman* and *Ethan* (1 Chronicles 6:31-48). Thus all of these individuals played a central role in Israel's corporate worship (2 Chronicles 20:18-19). Moses and Solomon didn't fall into this group, but they, too, enjoyed a vital place in Israel's life and the ministrations of Yahweh's sanctuary.

2. Subject Matter of the Psalter

The psalms encompass a broad range of subjects, circumstances, and emotion. But every one of them reflects Israel's all-encompassing relationship with God as covenant children and their obligation and privilege of devotion and faithfulness. Above all else, Israel was to be a *worshipping* people, fully devoted to Yahweh, their God, and the psalms express all of the dimensions, dynamics, impediments, and glory of that worship. So they address every emotion, condition, and circumstance associated with human life in relation to God, and thus bring to the forefront such issues as praise, worship, thanksgiving, supplication, imprecation, lament, and judgment.

- a. All of the psalms reflect Yahweh's lordship and covenant relationship with Israel as His election in Abraham, but some especially highlight His kingship and sovereign reign as such (Psalms 47, 93, 96-99, etc.).
- b. Others focus and celebrate Jerusalem and the sanctuary on Mount Zion as the place of Yahweh's enthronement from which He exercises His rule over Israel and the wider world. Psalms 46, 48, 76, and 84 are among these, and are sometimes referred to as *Songs of Zion*.
- c. Still other royal psalms focus on David and the preeminence and significance of His kingship and dynasty (Psalms 2, 18, 20-21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 144, etc.).
- d. Many others have a more individual and personal emphasis (psalms of lament, petition, thanksgiving, imprecation, etc.) *but they, too, are situated within and find their meaning in relation to the larger matter of Yahweh's lordship and His covenant faithfulness and promises to Israel in view of His purpose for His creation in and through them.*

These considerations help to show why and how the Psalter is thoroughly and profoundly *messianic*. At least fourteen psalms are overtly messianic, being referenced in the New Testament with respect to Christ and His work (Psalm 2, 8, 16, 22, 34, 35, 40, 41, 45, 68, 69, 109, 110, and 118). But even more, the entirety of the Psalter is messianic in that their concern with the divine-human relationship epitomized in Israel's life as covenant son attained its destiny, ultimate realization, and true meaning in person of Jesus of Nazareth, the True Image-Son and seed of Abraham and David.

Given their subject matter and messianic orientation, it's not surprising that the book of Psalms is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament book with the exception of Isaiah. Jesus Himself referred to the Psalms extensively, underscoring their crucial role in the formation of His understanding of His *Father* – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and His *intent* for His creation. The Psalter also nurtured Jesus' understanding of His *nation* and *people* and Israel's significance and obligation as God's election. Beyond that, the Psalms would have played a crucial part in forming Jesus' sense of His own *messianic identity and vocation*. And so they also became a key component of the apostolic witness to Him and the gospel of His kingdom (cf. Acts 2:22-36, 4:5-12, 23-31, 13:32-39).

3. The Psalms in Israel's Worship

Israel's worship – and so its use of the Psalter – was centered around the temple/tabernacle and its ordinances. There were two related reasons for this: The first was that God had mandated that He be worshipped in the place He Himself established as His dwelling. Initially, this place was the portable tabernacle that moved with the people, but the Lord later revealed to Moses that He was going to appoint a fixed habitation and place of worship once Israel took possession of Canaan. This requirement is sometimes referred to as the *law of the central sanctuary* (ref. Deuteronomy 12:1-14, 16:16), and during David's life God made known that Jerusalem was to be that site.

But there was a crucial principle underlying the obligation of localized worship in a single sanctuary: The living God must be worshipped in truth, and that means according to His own self-disclosure and the realm of encounter He has established (not so much where God is, but *how* He is in relation to His human creatures). *Israel needed to understand that they were not free to speculate concerning Him or innovate their own perspectives or approaches for encountering and relating to Him.* God reveals Himself to humans, and they must acknowledge and respond to Him accordingly. Any other perspective, understanding or approach to God (however well-intentioned) is idolatrous and will not be tolerated by Him who is true. Thus the foundational sin of the northern sub-kingdom of Israel – the sin initiated by king Jeroboam I – was establishing sacred altars and a system of worship contrary to Yahweh's prescription. This violation established the precedent for all of Israel's subsequent idolatry and rebellion, and so came to symbolize the nation's unfaithfulness and worthiness of judgment, exile and captivity (ref. 1 Kings 12:1-14:16; 2 Kings 17:21-23).

Israel's worship centered around God's sanctuary and its ministration, and this is reflected in their use of the psalms. *Mishnah Tamid* (the *Mishnah* is a written compilation of Jewish oral traditions) indicates that the temple worship included a daily psalm reading, with the sequence of psalms as follows: Psalms 24 (day one), 48 (day two), 82 (day three), 94 (day four), 81 (day five), 93 (day six), and 92 on the sabbath. In terms of Israel's annual feasts, reading of the *Songs of Ascent* (Psalms 120-134) was part of the observance of the Feast of Booths, during which Jewish pilgrim worshippers made their way up to Jerusalem and Mount Zion. The *Hallel* (psalms 113-118) was also read during the Feast of Booths, as at Passover and Pentecost (Feast of Weeks), which together comprised the three pilgrimage festivals (ref. again Deuteronomy 16:16). The practice of reading the Hallel continues to this day when Jews observe the Passover seder.

4. Categories of Psalms

a. Lament

This is the largest group of psalms in the Psalter. There are more than sixty lament psalms, *individual* and *corporate*. The former tend to be intensely personal (David penned many of these psalms), while the latter express Israel's collective lament. But in both cases, the lament reflects the covenant relationship and its privileges and responsibilities (cf. Psalms 3, 6, 13, 25, 31, 86 with 12, 44, 60, 74, 79).

b. Thanksgiving

Grounded in the same covenantal realities, these psalms express joy and gratitude to Yahweh for His various benefits of faithfulness, mercy, forgiveness, etc. This group, too, consists of individual (psalm 30) and corporate psalms (psalm 105).

c. Praise

These psalms center on the praise of God – for who He is in Himself, and for His greatness, power, and faithfulness toward His creation in general, and toward Israel in particular as His covenant people chosen on behalf of the entire world. The psalms of praise focus on Yahweh and His attributes, often with a call to the people of Israel to affirm and celebrate Him and His works of faithfulness.

d. Covenant History

This group of psalms rehearse Israel's history with God. On the one side, they trace out the nation's triumphs and failures in view of their election and vocation on behalf of the world. On the other side, they underscore God's demonstrated abiding faithfulness to His purposes, and therefore to the people He has chosen. Not surprisingly, then, these psalms tend to be climactic, ending on a note of confident hope of restoration and covenant renewal (Psalms 78, 106, 136).

e. Royal Psalms

This is a broad segment of psalms that place their emphasis on the kingship as it derives from God, who is the Great King (Psalms 24, 29, 47). The royal psalms include Davidic ones that highlight God's choice of David and the importance of his lineage in relation to the covenant God made with him (Psalms 18, 78, 89, 132). Not surprisingly, this category of psalms is richly *messianic* (Psalm 2, 45).

f. Songs of Zion

These psalms extol Jerusalem as Yahweh's dwelling place and the seat of His throne and reign over all the earth (Psalms 48, 84, 87, 122, 132, 137). Some of these psalms are laments as well, mourning the desolation that fell on Zion because of its unfaithfulness to its covenant Husband (Psalms 79, 137).

g. Imprecatory

This group of psalms are distinguished by their petition that Yahweh arise and act against the psalmist's adversaries. They are pleas for judgment, but always from the perspective that the psalmist's enemies are enemies of God and His purposes and kingdom. This is particularly evident in the imprecatory psalms composed by David, who viewed his adversaries and suffering through the lens of Yahweh's commission and covenant with him (cf. Psalms 5, 12, 35, 37, 52, 58, 69, 79, 109).