

Introduction to Psalms

I. Introduction to Psalms

A. The Purpose of this study

1. The purpose of studying the Psalms (or Psalter) is to better understand our God, and the attitudes and mindsets of His people in the past. The Psalms serve as a sort of literary sanctuary in which people call on God for different reasons. Just as much as God communed with man in the tabernacle and the temple, God, through the Psalms, communes with man through man's worship and praise of Him. There are, in fact, seven (roughly) different categories of Psalms, which cover everything from praise of God to lamenting over evils of life. The hearts and souls of faithful people of God over the course of 1,000 years are poured out in the Psalter.

2. One important point to emphasize is that the Psalter was very dynamic in the days of Israel. We have a psalm written as early as Moses (Psalm 90) and as late as post-exilic (Psalm 126, 137)

a) "The key is to see the Psalter as a living, open book during the whole Old Testament period. The Psalter was in constant use individually and corporately from its very beginning. In addition, new psalms were constantly added." (Longman, Tremper; *How to Read the Psalms*, pg. 43)

b) There are occasions where this is obvious:

(1) The Davidic Psalms at one time were all grouped, as Psalm 72:20 indicates. However, there are several psalms before (and including) Psalm 72 that were not written by David, and some after Psalm 72 that were written by David. Thus, no particular significance should be placed in the *order* in which the Psalms are presented.

(2) There are occasions in which the people of God took an old psalm and added a few commentary verses to it to make it more relevant to their situation: see Psalm 51:18, 69:35

(a) Preacher's Note: This should not cause unease or doubts about the integrity of the Scriptures. All Scripture is inspired by God. The few instances of additions that God's people made to certain psalms (primarily those of David) are the equivalent to reading a psalm and pointing out in what ways it applies to our life. There are other examples of this, such as in Deut. 34 which chronicles the death of Moses in a book that Moses himself authored. Someone, presumably directed by God (most assume as being Joshua), added this chapter to the end of the book. This addition by no means brings the integrity of the book into question, nor do we doubt its accuracy as inspired by God. The same is true for the Psalms.

B. How were the Psalms used?

1. To put to word the emotions and thoughts that poured forth from servants of God, particularly during difficult times of their lives.

a) "Each psalm was probably born of specific experience. For example, David was hunted by Saul and wrote a prayer of lament to God in response (Psalm 54)." (Longman, Tremper; *How to Read the Psalms*, pg. 49)

b) See "When Peace Like a River" and its history

2. For use in the temple worship

a) "Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the Psalms were used in the public and private worship of devout Israelites. We might even go a step further and, while affirming that the Psalms were used in private worship, say that most of the evidence for their primary use points to public worship. Indeed, the Psalms have appropriately been called 'The Hymnbook of the Old Testament'." (Longman, Tremper; *How to Read the Psalms*, pg. 47)

b) For evidence of this, see I Chron. 16:7, 4; Psalm 92 (For the Sabbath Day); The Songs of Ascents (Ps. 120-134) which would have been sung by worshippers as they ascended to Jerusalem and the temple mount.

3. For individual use in personal worship and prayer

a) “We get an example of an individual’s use of the Psalms in I Samuel. Hannah, Samuel’s mother, pours her heart out to the Lord. While the setting of her prayer is the area around the tabernacle (the arena of public worship), she is privately lifting up her voice to God in prayer (I Samuel 1:12-14). When her lament is answered, she then offers up a prayer of praise to God (2:1-11). What is of particular interest in the second prayer is its connection with Psalm 113. Perhaps here we see her basing her prayer on a well-known psalm and applying it to her own situation. This may have been a common practice. That is, an individual would pattern a prayer on a well-known psalm.” (Longman, Tremper; *How to Read the Psalms*, pg. 48)

C. Is there any way to conventionally outline the Psalms?

1. Nope

D. Is there any way to group the Psalms?

1. “The most obvious grouping of psalms is the division of the Psalter into five books (Ps.1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150). Five books were intentionally created to parallel the five books of Moses. Each of the five books of the Psalms concludes with a doxology. This may be illustrated by the last verse of Psalm 41 which is a lament.” (Longman, Tremper; *How to Read the Psalms*, pg. 43)

E. Is there any way to categorize the Psalms?

1. As mentioned earlier, there are roughly seven categories of psalms. These will be studied in detail later:

a) The Hymn, the Lament, Psalms of Thanksgiving, Psalms of Confidence, Psalms of Remembrance, Wisdom Psalms, and Kingship Psalms

2. Content includes: God’s covenant with Israel, the commandments of God, the presence of God, God’s presence in history, God as King, the importance of God’s Law, blessings and cursings, forgiveness, Messianic prophecies, prophecies concerning the New Law and Kingdom, etc...

3. However, just because a psalm may be a Lament psalm does not mean there can’t be elements of praise or remembrance.

a) “Genres are not written on tablets of stone; they are flexible. Psalms may be profitably studied under more than one of our stated genres. Psalm 45 is a kingship psalm, wisdom psalm, and hymn. Psalm 78 is both a psalm of remembrance and also a wisdom psalm...” (Longman, Tremper; *How to Read the Psalms*, pg. 35)

F. A few notes about the titles and ascriptions before many of the psalms:

1. These notes are meant to be read in conjunction with the psalm itself

a) “Most English translations make it appear as if the titles are only loosely connected to the psalms themselves, but this is not true in the Hebrew, where the titles usually constitute the first verse!” (Longman, Tremper; *How to Read the Psalms*, pg. 38)

2. However, some of the titles are later additions (post-exilic), meant to provide context for a psalm, and may not necessarily be accurate to the original writer’s intent. See Psalm 30, titled “For the dedication of the house/temple”, when the psalm actually seems to be a praise of thanks by someone who had been healed of an illness. Perhaps the best way to view this is that it was originally written as a psalm of thanks by a person healed of an illness, but then was later used during a rededication ceremony of the temple. This would constitute a similar situation as noted above regarding “updating” a psalm by relating a psalm’s application to a situation (i.e. while the psalm may have been written to thank God for a physical healing, Israel may have used it in rededication to represent a spiritual healing)