

Book of Psalms

“Title”: The English title comes from the Septuagint, which entitled the book Psalmoi, meaning “Sacred Songs Sung to Musical accompaniment”.

The Hebrew title for the book is *tehilim*, meaning “praises”.

If one word could be chosen to describe the book, certainly “praises” would qualify, for there is no psalm that does not contain an element of praise.

The entire collection of Psalms was entitled “Praises” in the Hebrew text, and later, rabbis often designated it “The Book of Praises”.

The Septuagint (LXX; the Greek translation of the Old Testament), labeled it “Psalms”. Compare “the Book of Psalms” in the New Testament (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20).

The Greek verb from which the noun “psalms” comes basically denotes the “plucking or twanging of strings”, so that an association with musical accompaniment is implied.

The English title derives from the Greek term and its background.

The Psalms constituted Israel’s ancient, God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), “hymn book”, which defined the proper spirit and content of worship.

There are 116 psalms that have superscriptions or “titles”.

The Hebrew text includes these titles, with the verses themselves.

When the titles are surveyed individually and studied as a general phenomenon, there are significant indications that they were appended to their respective psalms shortly after composition and that they contain reliable information (compare Luke 20:42).

These titles convey various kinds of information such as authorship, dedication, historical occasion, liturgical assignment to a worship director, liturgical instruction (e.g., what kind of song it is, whether it is to have a musical accompaniment, and what tune to use), plus other technical instructions of uncertain meaning due to their great antiquity.

One very tiny, attached Hebrew preposition shows up in the majority of the Psalm titles.

It may convey various different relationships, e.g. “of”, “from”, “by”, “to”, “for”, “in reference to”, or “about”.

Sometimes it occurs more than once, even in short headings, usually supplying “of”, or “by”, person X ... “to”, or “for”, person Y information.

However, this little preposition most frequently indicates the authorship of a psalm, whether “of” David, the accomplished psalmist of Israel, or “by” Moses, Solomon, Asaph or the various sons of Korah.

“Authorship – Date”: From the divine perspective, the Psalter points to God as its author.

Approaching authorship from the human side one can identify a collection of more than 7 various composers.

King David wrote at least 73 of the 150 Psalms;

The superscriptions (part of the Hebrew text before the first version English), name six authors.

Moses, 1 Psalm (Psalm 90);

David, 73 Psalms;

Asaph, 12 Psalms (Psalms 50, 73-83);

Solomon, 2 Psalms (Psalms 72, 127);

Heman, 1 Psalm (Psalm 88);

Ethan, 1 Psalm (Psalm 89).

In addition to these authors, 10 psalms are assigned to “The Sons of Korah”, (Psalms 42, 44-49, 84, 85, 87), though they were most likely performers rather than authors. (See the superscription in Psalm 88).

Many psalms are anonymous.

In such a collection of hymns, a widely divergent range of dates is inevitable: from the oldest, the Psalm of Moses (chapter 90), to a number of postexilic psalms, or a period of about one thousand years (1400 – 400 B.C.), to the late sixth or early fifth century B.C. post-Exilic period (Psalm 126).

“Background”: The backdrop for the Psalms is twofold:

(1) The acts of God in creation and history; and

(2) The history of Israel.

Historically, the psalms range in time from the origin of life to the post-Exilic joys of the Jews liberated from Babylon.

Thematically, the psalms cover a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from heavenly worship to earthly war.

The collected psalms comprise the largest book in the Bible and the most frequently quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament.

Psalms 117 represents the middle chapter (out of 1189), in the Bible.

Psalms 119 is the largest chapter in the entire Bible.

Through the ages, the psalms have retained their original primary purpose, i.e., to engender the proper praise and worship of God.

The Bible tells us that before Jesus and His eleven sorrowful, bewildered disciples left the Upper Room to walk the dark pathways to the Mount of Olives, they sang a hymn, a psalm.

So it has been through the millennia.

When God's people gather, whether in times of grief or celebration, they sing.

The song style and instrumentation change with time, but singing remains a deeply rooted, fundamental part of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

From the spontaneous choir of former slaves on the far side of the Red Sea to the elaborate professional choirs and orchestras King David assembled among the Levites, singing became integral in Israel as worship became more and more organized.

For instance, when David moved the ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem for the first time, he appointed "some of the Levites ... to praise the LORD God of Israel".

They used "stringed instruments and ... cymbals ... [and] trumpets" (1 Chron. 16:4-6).

He also gave Asaph and his kinsmen the directive that thanksgiving be sung to the LORD.

Years later, when the elderly David turned the kingship over to Solomon, he designated 4000 Levites to praise the LORD with musical instruments that were made for them (1 Chron. 23:5).

In addition, David set more than 300 others to sing ("prophesy), worship songs in the temple (1 Chron. 25:1-31).

All the music written for the instruments and all the songs written for the choirs came together hundreds of years later in what we now call the Book of Psalms, 150 prayers and songs that became the hymnbook of the people of God.

In fact, many of the words from those psalms found their way into historic hymns of the church and are now in contemporary praise and worship hymns.

While it is difficult to get the full effect without knowing the melodies, to read the words in Psalms is to read lyrics that once echoed off the walls of the temple in Jerusalem.

It is to join hearts and hands across time for the purpose of enthroning the God whose mercy endures forever.

What Does This mean to Us?

At least three major themes are woven through these 150 psalms:

God and His Rule:

Both Psalms and Proverbs were written as Hebrew poetry.

Psalms was used in worship, while Proverbs was used in instruction in homes and royal courts.

Psalms is all about God, whereas Proverbs focuses more about the horizontal relationships between people.

Whatever human affairs are included in Psalms are always in the context of people and their relationship to God.

Psalms is about the rule of God, His kingdom, law, glory, worthiness, primacy and standards.

As the songs of Psalms were sung in worship, the attention of worshipers was constantly directed upward, to Him.

Honesty:

The songs of Israel are characterized by passion, transparency, vulnerability, and pathos.

Whether the psalmist warns against concealing sin (32), begging for forgiveness (51), admitting there is no place to hide from God (139), acknowledging that evil so often seems to prevail (73), or asking God to administer justice to His enemies (55), readers are invited to come boldly to the throne of grace to find mercy and grace in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

Worship:

The Book of Psalms was Israel's hymn book.

It contained the individual and corporate reasons to praise God within the nation and to declare His glory to the nations.

It is no surprise that the entire book concludes with a final psalm that encourages worshipers to praise God in "church" and in all creation, with all manner of musical instruments, for His acts and His greatness (150:6).

"Historical – Theological Themes": The basic theme of Psalms is living real life in the real world, where two dimensions operate simultaneously:

- (1) A horizontal or temporal reality; and
- (2) A vertical or transcendent reality.

Without denying the pain of the earthly dimension, the people of God are to live joyfully and dependently on the Person and promises standing behind the heavenly/eternal dimension.

All cycles of human troubles and triumphs provide occasions for expressing human complaints, confidence, prayers, or praise to Israel's sovereign LORD.

In view of this, Psalms presents a broad array of theology, practically couched in various day-to-day reality.

The sinfulness of man is documented concretely, not only through the behavioral patterns of the wicked, but also by the periodic stumbling's of believers.

Therefore the sovereignty of God is everywhere recognized, but not at the expense of genuine human responsibility.

Life often seems to be out of control, and yet all events and situations are understood in the light of divine providence as being right on course according to God's timetable.

Assuring glimpses of a future "God's day" bolsters the call for perseverance to the end.

This book of praise manifests a very practical theology.

A commonly misunderstood phenomenon in Psalms is the association that often develops between the "one" (the psalmist), and the "many" (the theocratic people).

Virtually all of the cases of this occur in the psalms of King David.

There was an inseparable relationship between the mediatorial ruler and his people; as life went for the king, so it went for the people.

Furthermore, at times this union accounted for the psalmist's apparent connection with Christ in the messianic psalms (or messianic portions of certain psalms).

The so-called imprecatory (curse pronouncing) or the psalms could be better understood with this perspective.

As God's mediatorial representative on earth, David prayed for judgment on his enemies, since these enemies were not only hurting him, but were primarily hurting God's people.

Ultimately, they challenged the King of Kings, the God of Israel.

Classification of the Psalms:

There have been numerous attempts to classify the psalms.

Though each psalm is an individual poem with its own theme, there are enough noticeable shared forms and ideas to warrant categorization.

The following classification is based partly on form and partly on content:

1. *Lament Psalms* contain a plea for deliverance or defense and are addressed directly to God. They may be individual (Chapters 5-7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 42, 43, 51, 54-57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69-71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140-143). Or national (Chapters 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85, 90, 94, 106, 108, 123, 126, 137).
2. *Psalms of confidence* include a lament, but the ideas of security, peace, joy, and confidence predominate. They may be individual (Chapters 3, 4, 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 121, 131 (or national (Chapters 115, 125, 129).
3. *Songs of Thanksgiving* express public thanksgiving for what God has done or in anticipation of what He will do. They may be individual (Chapters 9, 10, 30, 32, 34, 40, 41, 92, 107, 116, 138), or national (Chapters 65-68, 118, 124).
4. *Psalms of Praise* are constructed around three key elements: a call to praise or introduction, a cause for praise (usually for God's attributes or deeds), and a conclusion (Chapters 8, 19, 29, 33, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, 145 – 150).
5. *Enthronement Psalms of the Divine Kingdom* contain the expression "the Lord reigns" (or, in the case of Psalm 98, "the Lord, the King"), and speak of the rule of God over all the earth. They are prophetic of Christ's kingly rule (Chapters 47, 93, 96 – 99).
6. *Songs of Zion* extol Zion, or Jerusalem, for its exalted role as the abode of God's glory and as the religious and political capital of the nation (Chapters 15, 24, 46, 48, 50, 76, 81, 84, 87, 95, 122, 134). The Pilgrim Psalms (see below), are sometimes included here, but they do not really constitute a distinct literary type.
7. *Royal Psalms* concern the reign of the king, either historical or messianic, or both (Chapters 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144).
8. *Wisdom Psalms* emphasize the traditional teaching of the wise men of Israel: meditation of the law, the way of the righteous versus the way of the wicked, and the necessity of practical righteousness (Chapters 1, 14, 37, 49, 52, 53, 73, 75, 91, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133, 139).
9. *Historical Psalms* trace the history of God's saving activity on behalf of Israel (Chapters 78, 105).

Other categories, identified strictly for content, overlap with the above.

These include the following:

1. *Messianic Psalms* are prophetic in some way of the Messiah. They include psalms in which the righteous man's character is a type of Christ (34:20; 69:4, 9), the righteous man's experience foreshadows Christ's experience (Chapter 22), the existing king's ideals and calling will be fulfilled in Christ, the ultimate King (Chapters 2, 45, 72), Christ's work is prophesied with no contemporary reference (only Chapter 110), or the

enthronement of Christ as universal King over the earth is predicted (Chapters 47, 93, 96 – 99).

2. *Imprecatory Psalms* contain an imprecation or prayer for retributive justice to fall on one's enemy (Chapters 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 140). These may be justified by remembering that the Israelites were building a political kingdom and, as long as evil men triumphed over them, God's rule was thwarted. The psalmists were concerned primarily with the glory of God, and at the very least, they did put the matter into God's hands for His just dealing. These prayers are actually in the same spirit as the petition "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10), because the coming of God's kingdom includes the destruction of the wicked (see the note on Psalm 109).
3. *Psalms of Ascents or Pilgrim Psalms* (Chapters 120 – 134), were sung by pilgrims journeying up to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.
4. *Acrostic Psalms* are those in which each verse begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (Chapters 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145). Psalm 119 is in a class by itself with eight verses for each letter of the alphabet.

Superscriptions in the Psalms:

The identification of many of the technical words in the superscriptions is dubious.

The headings include names for types of psalms ("a psalm"), musical terms ("to the chief musician"), melody indicators ("upon Shoshannim", Chapter 45), and liturgical indicators ("for the Sabbath day", Chapter 92).

Fourteen psalms contain historical superscriptions that give some brief mention of the occasion on which the psalm was written (Chapters 3, 7, 18, 30, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142).

Purpose of the Psalms:

The purpose of the psalms was well expressed by David when he instituted hymns in Israel.

He appointed the Levites "to record [better: make petition] and to thank and praise the LORD God of Israel" (1 Chron. 16:4).

The Book of Psalms is a record of petitions (or laments), thanksgiving, and the praise to God by His people.

As such it has brought comfort, encouragement, and very much blessing to God's people throughout the ages.

Every human emotion is covered in these hymns of aspiration to God.

Structure" The Book of Psalms is arranged in five books:

Book 1 (Psalms 1-41);

Book 2 (Psalms 42-72);

Book 3 (Psalms 73-89);

Book 4 (Psalms 90-106);

Book 5 (Psalms 107-150).

Each of the first four books concludes with a doxology, while Psalm 150 serves in its entirety as both a doxology for the fifth book and an appropriate conclusion of the entire Psalter.

The fivefold arrangement has long been recognized although no explanation for its origin has proven satisfactory.

The most common is the early Jewish tradition that judged the five books to be an imitation of the five books of Moses.

None to date, however, has satisfactorily enumerated undisputed likenesses between the two sets of books, although some parallels have been found.