

## SESSION EIGHT

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

In one sense, studying the Psalms is a great paradox . . .

on the one hand, no one can sufficiently understand the Psalms who does not know the worship and praise of God,

while on the other hand, no one has entered into the deepest expressions of worship and praise who does not know the Psalms

### I. THE PSALMS: THE CHOICE OF A TITLE

#### A. English Title

The title "Psalms" is a transliteration of the Greek word *psalmoi* (Ψαλμοί) which is the title given to the collection of psalms by the Greek manuscript, Codex Vaticanus.<sup>1</sup> The term actually means "a twanging of bow strings or harp strings" (Euripedes, *Ion*, 176). Hence, the term reflects that these were originally songs meant to be sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument (they were not meant simply to be read). The Hebrew term *mizmôr* (מִזְמוֹר), usually taken to mean "a (religious) song accompanied by stringed instrument(s)," occurs some 57 times in the titles of the Psalms. This may provide an acceptable reason why the Greek translators chose the title "Psalms," having taken the translation of the most common Hebrew term for a particular kind of song. This is significant: great theology plus great music equals a great impact upon our total person.

In their original setting, many of these psalms were sung in the ritual observances of the Temple. For the faithful Israelite, they would have been well known from the times when all the males gathered three times a year in Jerusalem, and they were often sung in accompaniment of the sacrifices.

#### B. Hebrew Title

The title in the Hebrew text is "tehillim" (תְּהִלִּים), based on the Hebrew root תָּלַל meaning "to praise." Though the psalms vary in their theme and content, they almost always contain some note of praise (except Ps 88). Hence, the term is appropriate. Even the psalms of lament progress beyond petition and lament to an element of praise. Basically, we can say that this book is a hymn-book of praise.

#### C. "The Writings" - Their Place in the Canon

The Hebrew canon of the Old Testament is composed of three parts: The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. In most manuscripts, the Psalter is placed first in the section known as the "Writings." This may suggest that the term "Psalms" as used in Lk 24:44 was a reference for

---

<sup>1</sup> Another Greek manuscript of the Old Testament, Alexandrinus, used the title *Psalterion*, from which the alternative English title "Psalter" is derived.

that whole section of Scripture, otherwise referred to as the Writings, being substituted because of its usual position of being placed first in the "Writings."

## II. NUMBERING IN THE PSALMS

When we open our Hebrew text, we observe that the verse numbering differs from that of our English text. This is due to the fact that the superscription in the Hebrew Masoretic text (MT)—which is actually part of the inspired biblical text—is often assigned a verse number (or even two). Some commentators, however, will use the Hebrew numbering (e.g., Delitzsch).

If we are comparing the MT (or the English Bible) to the LXX, the numbers for the psalms themselves will differ.

| MT        | LXX     |
|-----------|---------|
| 1–8       | 1–8     |
| 9–10      | 9       |
| 11–113    | 10–112  |
| 114–115   | 113     |
| 116:1-9   | 114     |
| 116:10-19 | 115     |
| 117–146   | 116–145 |
| 147:1-11  | 146     |
| 147:12-20 | 147     |
| 148–150   | 148–150 |

The Vulgate, older English versions (e.g., Wycliffe and Coverdale), and modern Catholic versions base their numbering on the LXX (note: keep this in mind if you are researching Catholic literature and articles by Catholic scholars).

## III. ORGANIZATION OF THE PSALTER

### A. Division into Five Books

The Book of Psalms is actually capable of division into five parts:

|          |         |
|----------|---------|
| Book I   | 1–41    |
| Book II  | 42–72   |
| Book III | 73–89   |
| Book IV  | 90–106  |
| Book V   | 107–150 |

This is not an arbitrary arrangement, but a reflection of the fact that the first four books conclude with a doxology while Psalm 150 occupies the place of the doxology (it forms an appropriate finale, a grand doxology, to the entire collection). Some have even suggested that

the five-fold division is an intentional allusion to the five-fold division of the Law (Pentateuch), thus emphasizing the central place of the Law (Torah) in Israel's faith.<sup>2</sup>

## B. Explanation of the Divisions

The psalms were written over a vast span of time and probably came to be collected by the Levites and those connected with the service of the tabernacle and temple. As time progressed, various psalms were placed in certain "collections" of psalms. Eventually, these "collections" were drawn together to form what we know to be the Book of Psalms. Evidence for this can be seen in the editorial remark in Ps 72:20, "The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended." However, not all of the Psalms preceding Ps 72 are Davidic, and at least seventeen Psalms ascribed to David follow this notation.

We should also notice the duplication that occurs in the Book of Psalms:

Ps 40:13-17 = Ps 70:1-5

Ps 57:7-11 = Ps 108:1-5

Ps 60:5-12 = Ps 108:6-13

Craigie comments that this probably indicates "that initially these psalms belonged to independent collections; when the collections were brought together, some duplication was inevitable."<sup>3</sup>

Others have pointed out the high number of uses of Elohim as opposed to Yahweh in Pss 42–83, in contrast to the rest of the Psalter in which Yahweh is more frequent.<sup>4</sup>

## C. Formation of the Psalter: A Possible Conjecture<sup>5</sup>

### 1. First Stage: Individual Poems

It began with poems by individuals: prayer by Moses, a song by David, etc. Some poems were selected for the regular worship, others were not. For example, the song of Miriam (Ex 15), the song of the Ark (Num 10:35-36), the oracles of Balaam (Num 23–24), the song of Moses (Deut 32), the blessing of Moses (Deut 33), the song of Deborah (Judges 5), the song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10), the lament of David (2 Sam 1), the Hymn of Jonah, etc., never became a part of the anthology of songs used in the hymn book of the temple. On the other hand, a prayer by Moses (Ps 90), a song by David (cf. 2 Sam 22:1 and Ps 18; 1 Chron 16:7ff with Ps 105:1ff) were adopted and perhaps adapted for the worship at the central shrine both before and after the erection of Solomon's temple. In addition, it may be inferred from the Chronicler that already in David's time, Levites prepared psalms for the temple worship (see 1 Chron 16:4).

### 2. Second Stage: Collecting of Poems

<sup>2</sup> Cf. C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering The Book of Psalms*, 58-59.

<sup>3</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, The Word Biblical Commentary, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Pss 42-83 are sometimes called the Elohist psalter, a designation given in view of the frequent use of the name Elohim (204 times) in relation to Yahweh (46 times). Notice the comparison with Book I where Yahweh is used 272 times and Elohim 15 times. In Pss 84-150, Yahweh is used 362 times and Elohim 13 times.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent summary discussion of the Psalter's formation, see chapter 3 of Bullock, "The Seams of the Garment of Praise: The Structure of the Book," 57-82. Cf. Gerald H. Wilson, *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993).

These songs were then collected. Craigie speculates that early date songs were written down and collected together in "books."<sup>6</sup> Possible ancient collections would have been the *Book of the Wars of the Lord* (Num 21:14) and *The Book of Yashar* (2 Sam 1:18). The ancient editorial remark at the end of Psalm 72:20, "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended" points to an older collection than the present Psalm-Pentateuch. The notice as it now stands can scarcely refer to the first seventy-two psalms (see II B above). The only firm conclusion we can draw from this early, editorial notice is that at one time Psalm 72 concluded a collection of Davidic prayers. We can only guess as to what form and content that older collection may have had.

Ross notes,

Other kings in their reforms also reorganized the musical guilds and temple musicians. Solomon organized temple singing (2 Chron. 5:11-14; 7:6; 9:11; Ecc 2:8). Jehoshaphat did also (2 Chron. 20:21-22) and so did Jehoiada (2 Chron. 23:18). Under Hezekiah's reform the musical guilds were reestablished (2 Chron. 29:25-28, 30; 30:21; 31:2).<sup>7</sup>

At a still later time, Josiah reinstated temple music and musical guilds (2 Chr 35:15, 25).

The notice in 2 Chr 29:30 that "Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer" suggests that two collections existed in Hezekiah's time: "the words of David" and "the words of Asaph." The bulk of the latter are presently found in the Third Book of the extant Psalter (Psalm 73–83); but compare Psalm 50 in the second book.

Other early collections in the Psalter can be discerned. The primary Davidic collection consists of Pss 3–41, and a secondary Davidic collection of Pss 51–71. The "Korah" collection consists of Pss 42–49 (with a possible exception of Ps 43) and Pss 84–88 (with the exception of Ps 86).<sup>8</sup> The "Asaph" collection consists of Ps 50 and Pss 73–83.<sup>9</sup> The Egyptian Hallel (praise) collection consists of Pss 113-118, traditionally associated with the Festival of Passover. Pss 120–134 make up the "Songs of Ascent." Lastly, Pss 146–150 make up the Hallelujah psalms.

### 3. The Third Stage: The Collection into Extant Books

The collection of these smaller anthologies into the five "books" as we now know them probably represents a third phase in the formation of the Psalter. Leupold attempts to reconstruct the development of the five books along chronological lines: "What is at least beginning to become evident," he writes, "is that different collections were quite obviously made by different persons in successive periods spread over quite a space of time."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Craigie, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Allen Ross, "Psalms," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, 783.

<sup>8</sup> Craigie notes, "The Korahites were Levites, descended through Kohath (1 Chr 6:22), who were involved in the music of the temple" (28).

<sup>9</sup> According to Craigie (28), "Asaph was a Levite musician who played a leading role in the music of worship during the time of David (1 Chr 15:17-19; 16:4-5) and whose descendants carried on the family tradition of music (Ezra 3:10)."

<sup>10</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms*, 3-4.

#### 4. Fourth Stage: The Work of the Final Editor

The work of the final editor represents the fourth and last stage in the formation of the Psalter. As Delitzsch points out: "the collection bears the impress of one ordering mind." All agree that psalms one and two form a fitting introduction to the entire Psalter and that psalms 145–150 constitute a grand finale to the book. While some have tried to trace an argument running through the entire, extant anthology of hymns, none has gained a following. On the other hand, one can detect some principles of arrangement through the successive psalms: same author, similar or contrasting situations, and words and phrases lead from one psalm to the next. These key words are usually noted in the commentaries.

Bullock offers a slightly different theory (*Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 59-61). He suggests that Books 1–3 formed a macro-collection at one point, headed up by Psalm 2 and finalized by Psalm 89, both being Messianic psalms related to the Lord's covenant with David in 2 Sam 7. Later, when Books 4–5 were added, Psalm 1 was used as an introduction to the entire collection, and Psalms 146–150 comprised a grand conclusion of praise.

#### D. Evidence of Groupings

1. Groups of *maskîl* (משכיל) psalms (43–45; 52–55; 88–89)
2. Groups of *miktām* (מקתם) psalms (56–60)
3. Ps 33 takes up 32:11
4. Ps 34 and 35 both speak of "the angel of YHWH" (מַלְאֲכַיִתְיָהוָה)

### IV. HEADINGS IN THE PSALMS

#### A. Various Designations

1. The *character* or *nature* of the poem (e.g., Pss 32, 120, 145)
2. Matters connected with its musical nature or designation of instrument (e.g., Pss 4, 5)
3. Liturgical use (e.g., Pss 38, 100)
4. The author or perhaps more strictly, the collection from which the Psalm was taken
5. The historical occasion for which it was written or which it illustrates (3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, and 142)

#### B. Headings Ascribed to Authors [see the chart at the end of the section for a helpful summary]

1. David — 73 psalms
2. Solomon — Ps 72 and Ps 127
3. Heman, the wise man — Ps 88 [also associated with Korah; see # 7 below]
4. Ethan, the wise man — Ps 89
5. Moses — Ps 90
6. Levitical singing clans of Asaph — twelve (Ps 50; 73–83)
7. Levitical singing clans of Korah — twelve (Pss 42–49; 84–85; 87–88)

8. Anonymous — 49 psalms (many of these are probably Davidic; e.g., Ps 2; comp. Acts 4:25).

### C. Position of Critical Scholars

In general, they do not put much confidence in the headings, but assume that these were later midrashic additions. In defense of their position, they point out the variations in the headings between the MT and the LXX.<sup>11</sup>

### D. Question of Davidic Authorship

#### 1. The Issue

In the word *l<sup>e</sup>dāwid* (לְדָוִד), the preposition "lamed" (ל) has been termed a "lamed of authorship."<sup>12</sup> Does this mean David was the author or that the Psalm stems from a collection ascribed to his name (as if intended for his use or that of another Davidic king; or perhaps inspired by King David; or perhaps dedicated to him)? Critical scholars opt for one of the latter alternatives to justify their late dating of the Psalms (e.g., Pfeiffer, who opts for a Maccabean date in the 2nd century BC). A.A.Anderson (*Psalms* 1:45) concludes that it signifies 'belonging to David' in the majority of cases.

#### 2. Response

There is evidence that some psalms are post-exilic (Ps 126 and 137). Although we cannot prove that *l<sup>e</sup>dāwid* means that David himself wrote the Psalm in every case, there is good reason to take the ל in this sense, at least in its use with David.<sup>13</sup>

- a. The use of ל to indicate authorship is paralleled in other Semitic dialects.<sup>14</sup>
- b. New Testament writers (both the Lord and His apostles) built arguments on superscriptions (Mk 12:35-37; Lk 20:42; Acts 2:29ff.).
- c. Similar notes are found outside the Psalms (2 Sam 22:1; Isa 38:9; Hab 3:1).
- d. Scripture testifies to David being a skillful musician (1 Sam 16:16-18) and a composer of songs (Amos 6:5). Also, Scripture attests that David was a singer of

---

<sup>11</sup>VanGemeren notes, "The study of the headings in the LXX reveals to what extent the superscriptions create problems in the study of the Psalms. First, the translators no longer understood the ancient titles. Second, the LXX has different headings from the MT. It adds 'of David' to psalms that do not contain this phrase in the MT (33, 43, 71, 91, 93-99, 104, 137) but deletes 'of David' in the superscription of Psalms 122 and 124. It is highly probable that the different liturgical use of the Psalms in Judah and in the Diaspora may account for the variety in the MT and LXX. This matter needs further exploration." See "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, 19.

<sup>12</sup>The preposition ל can be rendered "for, to (or dedicated to), of, concerning, or associated with."

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of "lamed" with a broader meaning, see Craigie's commentary on the Psalms (pp 33-35) in the Word Biblical Commentary series. Among other things, he points out (p 34) the variety of meaning for *l* in the Ugaritic texts. The expression *lb<sup>c</sup>l* would fall into the category meaning "about/concerning Baal" or perhaps "[tablet belonging] to [the]Baal [cycle]." The use of ל other than with the name of a person or group suggests wideness of usage (e.g., לִירוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת, "for use on the sabbath day"). Cf. לְמַנְצֵחַ, e.g., in Ps 4:1 – "for the musical director."

<sup>14</sup> *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley (Oxford), 129c.

songs and the primary organizer of the musical guilds for the sanctuary (1 Chron 15:3-28; 16:4-43; 23:1-5, 25; 2 Sam 6:5; also cf. 1 Chron 13:8).

- e. 2 Sam 23:1 — David is called "the sweet psalmist of Israel." The historical books attribute poetry to David (cf. 2 Sam 1:17-27; 23:1-7).
- f. In the Qumran manuscript 11QPs<sup>a</sup> Dav. Comp., it is said that David composed 3,600 psalms plus many other songs.
- g. *Aboth* vi:9 (from the Jewish Mishnah) — David is called the author of the Book of Psalms.
- h. David's confession: "The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me" (2 Sam 23:2).
- i. Ps 18 explicitly denotes Davidic authorship. Other psalms are specifically attributed to incidents in David's life (e.g., Pss 7 and 51).

### E. The Issue of Dating

The psalms cover a wide range of dates. Ps 90 comes from the days of Moses (*ca.* 1446 BC). Others are Davidic (*ca.* 1000 BC). Ps 137 reflects the Babylonian exile (after 586 BC), and Ps 126:1 stems from the return to Judah in 538 BC. Many critical scholars argue for a Maccabean date (2nd cent. BC) for many of the psalms, but do so with little justification.

## V. THE MATTER OF IMPRECATIONS IN THE PSALMS

### A. Definition:

An "imprecation" is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or enemies of God.

### B. The Problem Stated

The issue is an ethical one. Was it proper for David to wish "evil" upon his enemies? Furthermore, what are the implications for Christians today, not only concerning our attitudes but our prayers as well? Note Mt 5:43-45a. Can we truly love and pray for our enemies, and yet pray at the same time for tragedy to strike them?

### C. Psalms of This Type

There are at least seven psalms that fall into this category: 35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109 and 137. Of these, Psalms 35, 69, and 109 are the most intense.

### D. References for Further Study

Bullock, C. Hassell. "May They Be Blotted Out of the Book of Life": The Imprecatory Psalms" in *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 227-38. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001.

Laney, J. Carl. "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms." *BibSac* 138:549 (Jan-Mar 1981): 35-45.

Luc, Alex. "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms." *JETS* 42:3 (Sept 1999): 395-410.

Martin, Chalmers. *Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903): 537-53.

McKenzie, John L. "The Imprecations of the Psalter." *American Ecclesiastical Review* 111 (1944): 81-96.

Vos, Johannes G. "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecating Psalms." *Westminster Theological Journal* 4 (1992): 123-38.

Zuck, Roy. "The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms." Th.M. thesis, Dallas Seminary (1957).

### **E. Further Comments**

Some help to us is a differentiation between "revenge" and "avenge." "Revenge" is reflective of a vindictive spirit (i.e., of getting even), whereas "avenge" means that wrong will be righted, that God will judge.

A notable theme in the Psalms is David's confession of his integrity. He, amidst spiritually hostile enemies, is laboring in his role as king for God's kingdom. Hence, it is essential to his confidence that God will avenge all the wrongs done to him, because he is suffering on behalf of the kingdom of God.

To deal with the implication for Christians today, we must understand more clearly the nature of these prayers. They are really great prayers of faith that he (the psalmist) is not in a position to avenge himself, i.e., he doesn't take power into his own hand. Furthermore, they are righteous prayers, because they want to see justice done, and if God doesn't avenge wrong, then we live in an amoral universe.

There are distinctions for the present day as well. Under the Old Testament economy, God's avenging was more immediate. Today, however, we are much more conscientious that God is reserving the day of His vengeance against wrong. Knowing that we live with an understanding of God's grace and love for sinners, we submit ourselves to suffering, if necessary, that we may participate with our Lord in His "reaching out" to redeem fallen man. Hence, we may pray far more intelligently. Dr. Waltke once remarked to me, "We are free to become vulnerable and expend ourselves, because we know God will avenge the wrongs that occur when we represent Christ."

## **VI. ACROSTIC ARRANGEMENTS**

### **A. Explanation**

In some psalms, each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in consecutive order.

### **B. Which psalms are these?**

1. Pss 9 and 10 form one acrostic psalm
2. Ps 25
3. Ps 34
4. Ps 37
5. Ps 111
6. Ps 112
7. Ps 145
8. Ps 119 (22 sections of eight verses each)

## VII. REMINDERS FOR INTERPRETING THE PSALMS

1. When the superscription gives the historical event, the psalm should be interpreted in light of that. Otherwise, be careful not to conjecture too much.
2. Some of the psalms were associated with definite aspects of Israel's worship (e.g., Ps 5:7).
3. Many of the psalms utilize definite structural arrangement based on common motifs (e.g., lament, vow to praise, etc.).
4. Many psalms have fulfilment in some way with Christ, but be careful not to allegorize the psalms (i.e., finding Christ in everything).

The following chart is adapted from that of C. Hassell Bullock (see *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 26).

| AUTHOR TITLES IN THE PSALMS |  |   |   |                           |  |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---|---------------------------|--|
|                             | Bk 1 (1–41)  | Bk 2 (42–72)  | Bk 3 (73–89)  | Bk 4 (90–106)             | Bk 5 (107–50)  |
| Moses                       |  |   |   | Ps90                      |  |
| David                       | Pss 3–32<br>(taking 9 and 10<br>as a single<br>psalm, 34–41) | Pss 51–65, 68–<br>71 (taking 70<br>and 71 as a<br>single psalm) | Ps 86   | Pss 101, 103              | Pss 108–10,<br>122, 124, 131,<br>133, 138–45                             |
| Solomon                     |  | Ps 72   |   |                           | Ps 127   |
| Asaph                       |  | Ps 50   | Pss 73–83   |                           |  |
| Sons of Korah               |  | Pss 42–49<br>(taking 42 and<br>43 as a single<br>psalm)         | Pss 84–85, 87–<br>88 (both "sons<br>of Korah" and<br>"Heman" are<br>noted in Ps 88) |                           |  |
| Heman                       |  |   | Ps 88 (both<br>"sons of Korah"<br>and "Heman"<br>are noted)                         |                           |  |
| Ethan                       |  |   | Ps 89   |                           |  |
| Anonymous                   | Pss 1–2, 33 (but<br>see Acts 4:25 in<br>regard to Ps 2)      | Pss 66–67   |   | Pss 91–100,<br>102, 104–6 | Pss 107, 111–<br>21, 123, 125–<br>26, 128–30,<br>132, 134–37,<br>146–150 |