

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Background of Psalms

GENERAL: The Psalms give the heart and feeling of God's law, and that is their primary importance. David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), and the outpouring of his (and others') thoughts and feelings on his knees in prayer, or in song, before God is a tremendous example to be carefully studied and personally applied.

In context, God is love. Love was defined by Christ as love toward God and love toward neighbor. That is further defined by four commandments which tell us how to love neighbor. The Ten Commandments are further broken down and defined by the five books of the law (Gen. - Deut.). Then the prophets add another dimension: The former prophets (Joshua-II Kings) show us how historically blessings came by obedience to God's law, and how historically cursings came by disobedience. The latter prophets (Isaiah-Malachi) project the same lessons of blessing and cursing into the future. The writings, beginning with Psalms, gives even further and finer specifications of the application of God's law. Of those, Psalms especially gives the whole heart, feeling, and approach one needs to have toward God's law.

Five specific applications of Psalms are these: 1) Prayers. They can be examples of how to pray. They can be a guide to getting started in prayer, or become your own personal prayers in particular cases. 2) History. They show what went through David's mind in certain situations in his life. They even contain added details about the history of Israel. 3) Songs and poetry. Our hymnal is a prime example of this. (Hebrew poetry is not a rhyme of words -- but a rhyme of thoughts.) 4) Prophecy. Psalm 22, for example, is a detailed prophecy of Christ. Other's talk about Christ's return, and other events in the future. 5) Practical. The Psalms contain direct how-to instruction, though not generally in the same specific way as Proverbs.

These are the reasons the book of Psalms is contained in the Bible for you and me, and must be the primary focus in the study of Psalms. What follows is only of secondary importance.

NAME: The English title "Psalms" comes from the Latin Vulgate Liber Psalmorum or Psalmi for short. The Latin comes from the Greek Psalmoi -- the title found in most Greek manuscripts (of the LXX -- the Septuagint). The New Testament uses this title (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20). The word meant "a song sung to a stringed instrument" -- and apparently is a translation of the Hebrew term mizmor which occurs 57 times in the individual Hebrew captions of many of the psalms. The Hebrew scriptures do not preserve any original title for the entire book. But in rabbinic and later literature

the accepted Hebrew name of the book was Sefer Tehillim, or Tillim. A tehillah was a song of praise. The Hebrew title may have come from the Hebrew root hll, which is characteristic of the language of the Psalms. In later books it carried the special connotation of "Temple worship" (compare Ezra 3:10-11; Neh. 5:13; 12:24; I Chron. 16:4, 36; 32:5).

PLACE IN CANON: Psalms begins the third basic division of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Ketuvim, or Writings. The New Testament indicates this -- "the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" (Luke 24:44). II Maccabees 2:13 speaks of "books about the kings and prophets and the writings of David" Philo talks about "Laws and oracles delivered by prophets and hymns and other writings" (Cont. 25). Different (valid) manuscripts contain a variety of orders of the writings. But Psalms always either heads the list, or is preceded only by Ruth and/or Chronicles. The precedence of Ruth in some places is apparently due to the closing genealogy of David (Ruth 4:18-22) -- David being the principle author and compiler of the Psalms. In Hebrew printed Bibles, the Psalms always come first.

NUMBER OF PSALMS: The content of the Psalms is the same in all editions. But there are differences in the divisions and combinations of psalm units. Current editions of the *Psalms* all contain 150 psalms. The LXX also has 150, but it combines into single psalms the Hebrew 9-10 and 114-115. It divides the Hebrew 116 and 147 into two psalms each. Various individual Hebrew manuscripts contain 147, 148, 149, 151, 159, and 170 psalms.

The reason for the different divisions seems to be this: the rabbis reduced the traditional number of psalms to 147 (Mid. Ps. 22:19; 104:2) for homiletical purposes. The Torah was customarily read each Sabbath in the Palestinian synagogues in a three-year cycle (compare Meg. 28b). It is presumed that the Psalms were also read weekly, in association with the Torah and the prophets. We see this in the statement "Moses gave the five books of the Torah to Israel, and corresponding to them, David gave the five books of Psalms to Israel" (Mid. Ps. 1:2). To emphasize this relationship, as well as for convenience, the number of Psalms was lowered to 147, to make them correspond to the number of sedarim (divisions) in the rest of the scriptures. Since the divisions of the prophets varied from community to community, this would account for the different numbers of psalms in different manuscripts.

Apparently Psalms 1 and 2 were early conjoined, as is mentioned in the Talmud and in some New Testament manuscripts (Acts 13:33 -- many manuscripts say the "first psalm" -- though the quote is from Psalm 2:7, according to the printed Hebrew Bible). An acrostic psalm spans Psalms 9-10, showing they originally constituted a single psalm in the Hebrew, as it does in the LXX. Such combinations are the reason why one Talmudic writer quotes the present Psalm 20:2 and ascribes the verse to Psalm 18 (Ber. 4:3, 8a; Ta'an 2:2, 65c) -- apparently it was Psalm 18 in his book of psalms!

Other documented examples of conjoined psalms are 42-43, 53-54, 70-71, 93-94, 94-95, 104-105, 114-115, 116-117, 117-118:4. In some manuscripts 118 and 119 are subdivided.

VERSE DIVISION: Verse division of the psalms was done quite early. The western masorah's note (these were scribal notes made to ensure accuracy in the transmission of the text) at the end of the book specifies 2, 527. The eastern masorah details three fewer -- 2, 524 -- due to the combination of two verses into one in 22:5-6; 52:1-2; 53:1-2 and 129:5-6, and the division into two of Psalm 90:1.

BOOK DIVISION: Psalms is divided into five books, each ending similarly in praise to God.

BOOK I, Ps. 1-41: 41:14 -- Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel,
From eternity to eternity. Amen and
Amen.

BOOK II, Ps. 42-72: 72:18-20 -- Blessed is the Lord God, God
of Israel, Who alone does wondrous things;
Blessed be His glorious name for ever,
And let His glory fill the whole world.
Amen and Amen. End of the prayers of
David son of Jesse.

BOOK III, Ps. 73-89: 89:53 -- Blessed be the Lord to eternity
Amen and Amen.

BOOK IV, Ps. 90-106: 106:48 -- Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel,
From eternity to eternity.
And let all the people say
Amen, Hallelujah.

BOOK V, Ps. 107-150: There is no "closing formula" to Book V.

It is possible that Psalm 150 was regarded as such for the entire book.

The "doxologies" to Books I, II, III are not a part of the final psalms to which they are attached. This may indicate that each of these three books was once an independent collection -- a separate hymnal as it were. The colophon to Book II -- which says the prayers of David are ended with Psalm 72 -- also indicates this. For there are 18 psalms "of David" (at least) in the subsequent books. But David's prayers had "ended," as far as that particular book (Ps. 42-72) was concerned.

The statement "end of the prayers of David" obviously doesn't mean "end of the time of David." It wasn't that David added to the book a psalm at a time, throughout his life. Rather, the first psalm ascribed to David in the superscription, Psalm 3, tells about an incident near the end of David's life! In fact, the chronological order of the psalms associated with events we know about in the life of David is this: Psalms 59, 56, 34, 57, 142, 52, 63, 54, 60, 51, 3, 7, 18.

The repetition of psalms also indicates Books I, II, III may have been each separate hymnals at one time. Psalm 14 in Book I reappears as Psalm 53 in Book II. Psalm 40:14-18 in Book I reappears as Psalm 70 in Book II. Parts of two psalms in Book II, Psalm 57:8-12 and Psalm 60:7-14 become Psalm 108 in Book V (verse numbering is according to Jewish translation).

There are some reasons to think, however, that the division between Books IV and V is artificial. The "doxology" of Book IV seems to be an integral part of Psalm 106 and may not originally have applied to the entire collection. There is no "Amen and Amen." Books IV and V differ from the others in that 18 of the 61 psalms have no superscriptions, as opposed to only six without superscriptions in the foregoing 89 psalms. Moreover, there are no musical references in Books IV and V, and such characteristics technical terms as La-Menazze'ah and Selah are almost totally absent. On the other hand, "Hallelujah" occurs only in Books IV and V. The subject matter of the two is similar -- psalms of praise and thanksgiving suitable for public service in the Temple.

The division of the four books into five may have been suggested, then, by the analogy of the Torah, read week by week with the Psalms.

COMPOSITION OF THE BOOKS: In Book I every psalm is specified as

Davidic, with the exceptions of Psalms 1, 2, 10, and 33. But 33 has a "Davidic" superscription in the Greek, and Psalm 10 apparently was originally part of Psalm 9 (forming an acrostic). That leaves Psalm 1 and 2, also at one time a single psalm apparently. Psalm 1-2 may have been added after the rest were collected together into a hymnal, as an ideal introduction to the whole work. They introduce the blessings of obedience based on God's law, and the cursings of disobedience -- and then talk about the coming of Christ, of whom David was a type.

Psalms 42-83 in Books II and III are termed by scholars "Elohistic" psalms because of the rarity of "YHVH" and the frequency of the appearance of "Elohim," in contrast to the rest of the psalms. In the repetition of Psalm 14 in Psalm 53, "YHVH" in the former becomes "Elohim" in the latter, and the same switch occurs in Psalm 40 and Psalm 70. Unique combinations like Elohim Elohai and Elohim Elohekha occur (Psalms 43:4; 45:3, 50:7).

Psalms 51-65 and 68-70 are more Davidic psalms. Korahite psalms are 42-49, and Asaphic psalms are Psalms 50, 73-83. Psalms 66, 67, 71 are anonymous in the received Hebrew text. Psalm 72 is Solomonian.

To this "Elohistic" group are added Psalms 84-89, consisting of four more Korahite psalms, one Davidic psalm, and one psalm of Ethan. This completes Book III.

Books IV, V contain some smaller groups. A group of 15 psalms (120-134) are entitled Shir ha(la)-Ma'alot, translated in the KJV "songs of degrees." The title "Hallelujah" psalms has been given to Psalms 104-106, 111-117, 135, 146-150.

AUTHOR: Psalms was basically compiled by David, but contains the compositions of ten earlier authorities -- Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Jeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah (BB 14b, 15a).

Seventy-three of the 150 psalms are designated le-David. The precise connotation of this term is not certain. It can mean David was the author ("by David") or that the psalm is connected with an event in the life of David ("concerning David") -- or, of course, both. The traditional understanding is that le-David meant David was the author. Psalm 18 explicitly says David "addressed the words of this song to the Lord." The colophon to Book II says "End of the prayers of David son of Jesse." II Maccabees 2:13 mentions the writings of David in reference to the Book of Psalms. As mentioned before, the Talmud ascribes the five books to David, in analogy with the five books of Moses.

David was a skillful player on the lyre (I Sam. 16:16-23), an inventor of musical instruments (Amos 6:5; Neh. 12:36; I Chron. 23:5; II Chron. 29:26-30), a composer of dirges (II Sam. 1:17; 3:33), and was known as the "sweet singer of Israel" (II Sam. 23:1). David was responsible for the organization of the guilds of Temple singers and musicians for public worship in the first temple (Neh. 12:24; I Chron. 6:16 ff.; 16:4-7, 41-42; 25:1, 5; II Chron. 7:6; 8:14; 23:18; 29:26-27, 30).

TYPES OF PSALMS: Any general classification of psalms will never be entirely precise. But certain categories can be attempted.

A. The Hymn -- celebrates the majesty, greatness, and providence of God.

1. Examples: Ps. 8, 19a, 29, 33, 65, 66, 92, 100, 104, 113, 114, 117, 135, and 145-150.

2. A special category of these extol God's royal role in the universe: Ps. 47, 93, 96-99.

3. Another group -- "Zion songs" -- glorify God's city and His holy mount: Ps. 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122.

4. Two psalms especially acclaim God's law: Ps. 19b, 119.

B. About one-third of the psalms are "laments" -- appeals to God for help -- either on a national or personal level.

1. National: Ps. 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 89c, 94.

2. Personal: Ps. 3, 5, 6, 7, 9-10, 13, 17, 22, 25-28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 41, 42-43, 51, 52, 54-57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 71, 77, 86, 88, 102, 120, 123, 130, 140-143).

3. Some of these psalms are distinguished by the expression of absolute faith that the prayers will be heard. Collectively: Ps. 46, 125, 129.

4. Personally: Ps. 4, 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 91, 121.

C. Thanksgiving Psalms.

1. National or community: Ps. 66, 67, 118, 136.

2. Personal: 9-10, 18, 30, 34, 41, 111, 138. (Psalm 107, 144 seem to be both.)

3. Some of these psalms specify the original problem which has given way to new circumstances: 6, 13, 22, 28, 30, 31, 36, 41, 54, 55, 56, 61, 63, 64, 69, 71, 86, 94, 102, 130.

D. Royal Psalms -- center on the "anointed one" of God: 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 110, 132, 144.

E. Pedagogical

1. Reflective or sententious: 1, 34, 36, 37, 49, 73, 78, 112, 127, 128, 133.

2. Conduct pleasing to God: Ps. 15, 24, 32, 40, 50.

3. Historical: 78, 81, 105, 106, 114.

Notice that these general categories of psalms span all five "books" of psalms. To say, "This particular book of Psalms talks about this or that" is to miss the point. Each individual psalm is important in its living context of you and your life today. Psalm 51 is not primarily important because David prayed it when he sinned against God in the incident with Uriah and Bathsheba. It is instead important to you and me as an example of right attitude and heartfelt repentance! And how much less important is a vague generalization -- not just about a single psalm -- but an entire book of psalms. To assign a section of psalms to a far-off, long-ago historical context is to dismiss their relevancy and real importance. Categorizing a book of psalms that way is like saying, "The book of I Corinthians is in the Bible because it describes the sins of a Christian congregation in a Greek city in the first century A.D." First-century Greek cities are just not the point of the book.

SUPERSCRPTIONS AND TECHNICAL TERMS: Only 24 psalms have no headings at all: Ps. 1, 2, 10, 33, 43, 71, 93-97, 99, 104, 105, 107, 114-119, 136, 137.

David. Seventy-three psalms are connected with the name David: Book I, 37 (3-9, 11-32, 34-41). Book II, 18 (51-65, 68-70). Book III, one (86). Book IV, two (101, 103). Book V, 15 (108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138-145).

It should be noted that 96, 105, 106, and 107 are connected with David in I Chronicles 16, yet they do not have superscriptions in the Hebrew text. Many of the psalms are connected with some event in the life of David: Ps. 3 with II Sam. 15-19; 7 (?II Sam. 13:21); 18 (II Sam. 22); 34 (I Sam. 21:14); 51 (II Sam. 11-12); 52 (I Sam. 22:9); 54 (I Sam. 23:19; 26:1); 56 (?I Sam. 21:11; 27:2); 57 (I Sam. 22:1; 24:3); 59 (I Sam. 19:11); 60 (II Sam. 8:13; I Chron. 18:1-12); 63 (I Sam. 23:14; 24:1; 26:2), 146 (I Sam. 22:1; 24:3).

Asaph. Asaph had a prominent position in the temple under David (Neh. 12:46; I Chron. 6:24; 15:19). Twelve psalms are associated with him (50, 73-83).

Korahites. The Korahites are first recorded as participating in the public worship of the Temple in Jehoshaphat's time (II Chron. 20:19). There are eleven Korahite psalms (42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88).

Heman, Ethan. Heman and Ethan are assigned one psalm each (Ps. 88, 89). Both have the title "Ezrahite." Both were leaders of the Temple musicians under David (I Chron. 2:6; 6:18), and were famous for their wisdom (I Kings 5:11).

Solomon. Psalm 72 is a psalm le-Solomon. This may refer to the content rather than the authorship. Psalm 127 is also connected with Solomon.

Moses. Moses is mentioned as the author of Psalm 90. Notice the similarity of Verse 1 and Deut. 33:27, Verse 10 and Ex. 7:7, Verse 13 and Exodus 32:12.

Jeduthun. Psalms 39, 62, and 77 are ascribed to Jeduthun, who was a levitical singer in David's time (I Chron. 16:38, 41, 42; 25:1, 3, 6; II Chron. 5:12).

Other names: The LXX adds "Zechariah" in Psalm 137 and "Haggai and Zechariah" in Psalm 146, 147:1, 147:12, and 148.

Liturgical Titles: Psalm 30 mentions the "dedication of the Temple." Psalm 100 implies a connection with the thank (todah) offering. Psalm 92 indicates a Sabbath song.

TECHNICAL TERMS: Many of these superscriptions are obscure. They were apparently terms used professionally by the guilds of singers and musicians.

Mizmor: Apparently refers to music connected with worship. The word appears only in the Book of Psalms, and only in the headings of certain psalms, 57 in all. With one exception, it is always used with a personal name: "a psalm of David," etc. Mizmor was translated psalmos in the LXX, and became the English word "psalm."

La-Menazze'ah. This term occurs in the heading of 55 psalms, and in Habbakkuk 3:19. The verb is used in the sense of overseeing labor (Ezra 3:8, 9; I Chron. 23:4; II Chron. 2:1, 17; 34:13), so medieval Jewish commentators took it to mean "director, overseer, choir-master," etc. I Chron. 15:21 and II Chron. 34:12 show the term's connection with music. The LXX took it to mean "eternity." The Targum understood it to mean "praise."

Shir. Thirty psalms are entitled shir, and may refer to "secular" or "religious" songs. The invocation "sing ye!" (shiru) is used only with worship services. Shir is used with mizmor five times, and may thus indicate words set to a rhythm (cf. "to speak a song" Jud. 5:12).

Shir ha-Ma'alot. Appears at the head of 15 psalms (Ps. 120-134). The LXX translate it "songs of degrees" (compare II Kings 20:9-11 -- the shadow moved back ten "degrees"). "Steps" or "ascents" are possible renderings. The Mishnah takes ma'alot to mean "steps" and draws a connection with the 15 steps joining the court of the Israelites to the court of women in the Second Temple on which the levitical musicians stood during the ceremony of the "drawing of water" on Sukkot (Suk. 5:4; Mid. 2:5).

Maskil. In the headings to 13 psalms (Ps. 32, 42, 44, 45, 52-55, 74, 78, 88, 89, 142). The LXX took it to mean "instruction" (cf. Ps. 32:8). It may refer to some special skill required in the manner of musical performance.

Neginot. Appears in Ps. 4, 6, 54, 55, 67, 76 (preceeded by le-menazze'ah). From I Sam. 16:16, 23, it must indicate stringed instruments.

Mikhtam. Appears with David's name in six psalms (Ps. 16, 56-60). The LXX rendered it stelographa -- "an inscription on a slab." (Compare mikhtav "writing" in Isa. 38:9 -- probably same meaning.)

Tefillah. "Prayer" -- appears in Ps. 17, 86, 90, 102, 142 (and Hab. 3). Note Ps. 72:20 -- "the prayers (tefillot) of David."

Al Shoshannim, Al Shushan 'Edut, etc. "On the lillies" (Ps. 45, 69). "On the lily of testimony" (Ps. 60). "To the lilies of testimony" (Ps. 80). They may be cue-words to the tune of the psalm. Or it may refer to a six-stringed instrument shaped like the lily.

'Al Tashhet. "Do not destroy" (Ps. 57-59, 75).

'Al ha-Gittit. In Psalms 8, 81, 84. Ancient versions usually connect the term with the winepress (*gat*). Perhaps the tune was once sung by grape-treaders (see Jer. 25:30). The Targum on the other hand indicates a musical instrument derived from the Philistine city of Gath.

'Al ha-Sheminit. Lit. "on the eighth." May refer to an octave or to an eight-stringed instrument in Ps. 6, 12. I Chron. 15:21 "with lyres on the sheminit" may be a quality of voice, perhaps a low bass.

Lehazkir. Used in I Chron. 16:4, suggesting a liturgical meaning in Ps. 38, 70 (translated "to make memorial" in Jewish translation). Used in connection with God's name (Ex. 20:21; Isa. 26:13; 48:1; 62:6; Amos 6:10; Ps. 20:8), with sinfulness (Gen. 41:9; Num. 5:15; I Kings 17:18; Eze. 21:28, 29; 29:16) and with the meal offering (Lev. 2:2; 24:7; Num. 5:15, 26; Isa. 66:3).

'Al Mahalat. In Ps. 53, 88. May be a cue-word to the song. Or may indicate a wind instrument (I Kings 1:40) or a choreographic direction (Judg. 21:23). It could also be translated "for sickness" (I Kings 8:37).

'Al Alamot. In Ps. 46. May refer to a musical instrument such as a small flute or pipe, or express a quality of the voice -- "youthful" (cf. almah, "a maiden"), perhaps high-pitched or soprano.

'Al Mut la-Ben. In Ps. 9. "Male soprano" -- or may be a cue word.

'El ha-Nehilot. Ps. 5. A wind instrument, or a cue word.

'Al 'Ayyelet ha-Shahar. Ps. 22. Perhaps a cue word to the tune -- that of a well-known song "On the hind of the morning."

'Al Yonat 'Elem Rehoqim. Ps. 56. As above "On the speechless dove far-off" or "on the dove of the far-off terebinths." The LXX took "dove" to mean Israel, and elem to mean "gods" or "holy ones."

Shir Yedidot. "A love song" in Ps. 45, which celebrates a marriage.

Lelammed, "To teach" Ps. 60.

Le'anot. "To afflict" Ps. 88. Could have a connection with Lev. 23:27, 29. Or might be an intensive form of 'anah ("to chant" -- Ex. 15:21; 32:18) -- indicating some antiphonal arrangement in the performance of the song.

Shiggayon. Ps. 7, Habakkuk 3. On the basis of a similar Akhadian root, segu, "to howl, lament," taken to mean a psalm of lamentation.

Tehillah. Psalm 145. (See NAME, above).

Hallelujah. Ps. 106, 111-113, 135, 146-150. An invocation.

TECHNICAL TERMS WITHIN THE PSALMS:

Selah. 71 times in Psalms and 3 times in Habakkuk. Found only in the middle or end of a verse, never in the beginning. There is no agreement among ancient versions of Jewish commentators as to its meaning. The position of Selah in a psalm may not always have been original, but could be the work of a later scribe. The LXX translates selah as diapsalma, but the meaning of the Greek is as obscure as the Hebrew. The usual rendering "interlude" -- indicating perhaps an instrumental interlude -- is not certain. The Targum understand it as part of the text of the verse, meaning "always" or "for eternity." The same interpretation can be found in the Talmud (Er. 54a), and the use of selah in the Hebrew prayer book. The pointing of the Hebrew text reflects this tradition.

Another explanation connects it with the Hebrew root sil, in the sense of raising up -- an instruction for the singers or musicians. Others have even connected the term to sal ("basket") -- concluding that a basket-shaped drum was beaten at these points.

Higgayon. Ps. 9:14 and 92:4. It is part of the text of Ps. 19:15 where it implies "utterance" or "musings." Comes from the root "to make a sound." May be a musical instruction for a glissando or a flourish.