

PSALMS

For these introductory notes on the Psalms, extensive use was made of J.B. Payne's scholarly article, "Psalms, Book of," in the *ZPBE*. Also, see Archer, *SOTI*, and the introductory section in A.F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*.

I. Prefatory remarks

- A. Josephus, *Contra Apion*, I:8 — the remaining four books of the Hebrew canon “embrace hymns to god and counsels for men for the conduct of life....”
- B. Payne, p. 932, “[The Book of Psalms] is more quoted by the NT than any other book and is revered by Christians up to the present day. The Psalter is individualistic, personal, and emotional; its 150 poems constitute, in fact, the height of God-given literature.”
- C. Puritan Richard Hooker, cited in Kirkpatrick's preface:

“What is there necessary for man to know which the Psalms are not able to teach? They are to beginners an easy and familiar introduction, a mighty augmentation of all virtue and knowledge in such as are entered before, a strong confirmation to the most perfect among others. Heroical magnanimity, exquisite justice, grave moderation, exact wisdom, repentance unfeigned, unwearied patience, the mysteries of God, the sufferings of Christ, the terrors of wrath, the comforts of grace, the works of Providence over this world, and the promised joys of that world which is to come, all good necessarily to be either known or done or had, this one celestial fountain yieldeth. Let there be any grief of disease incident into the soul of man, any wound or sickness named, for which there is not in this treasure-house a present comfortable remedy at all times ready to be found.”

- D. English Psalter Trivia: For literary beauty in the English language, the KJV Psalter is at the top of translations. The English language reached a high water mark during the Elizabethan period. William Shakespeare himself was called as a consultant in translating the Psalms.

There is a historical theory that the translators decided to honor their day's literary champion in a bold, yet cryptic way. According to Arthur Farstad (*The NKJV in the Great Tradition*), the 46th word of Ps. 46 is “shake.” The 46th word from the bottom of the Psalm is “spear.” He continues, “Also, in February of 1611 when the KJV was first published, Shakespeare (1564-1616) was forty-six years old.... The four forty-sixes are simply too many to be coincidental, so the story must be true.” More likely, the Ps. 46 tradition is apocryphal.

II. Name

- A. Hebrew title: תְּהִלִּים *Tehellim*, “Praise Songs”
 - 1. Only five Psalms bear this ascription, e.g., Ps. 145
 - 2. Still, it is a good categorization
 - a. Lyrical nature of most of the Psalms
 - b. Use in public worship and/or private devotion for most of the Psalms
 - c. Call to obedience in Psalm 1, etc., issues in right living: the proper response of praise and thanksgiving which is the climax found in Psalms 146-150.

B. Some other Hebrew Psalm descriptions based on lyrical FORM

1. מִזְמוֹר *Mizmor*, the most common ascription (57X). From זָמַר *zamar*, “to pluck,” (ctr. Arabic, *zamara*, “to play on a reed”); thus these Psalms were apparently accompanied by stringed instruments
2. שִׁיר *Shir*, (29X). “Song;” a general term for vocal music.

C. LXX influence

Although the LXX translation was far enough removed in time from the compilation of the Psalms so that the translators made a mess of certain technical (musical) Hebrew Psalm titles, tradition was clear enough for them to give the new title, Ὅτι Ψαλμοὶ *Hoi Psalmoi*, to the Psalter.

“Psalmoi” originally meant “twangings, the sound of a harp,” and naturally was applied to songs sung to the harp, viz., “Psalms.” A collection of Psalms was called a “Psalterion,” (cf. English “Psalter”), the title of the Psalms in Codex A (as opposed to “Hoi Psalmoi” of the LXX).

III. Authorship

As poems, the Psalms give little historical circumstance of their composition or concrete biographical data of their author. Help may be found in the Psalm Titles.

A. Authenticity of the Psalm titles

1. Contained in all Hebrew mss.
2. All earliest translations except the Syriac include the titles in their versions. Significantly, most versions like the LXX, mistranslate obscure ancient terms from the titles.
3. Hebrew tradition includes the titles in with the inspired text as indicated by the titles being numbered in the versification.
4. J.W. Thirtle in his major work, *The Titles of the Psalms* (1905), suggested that the Psalms should have a technical postscript as much as a title; in other words, he felt that many of the Psalm titles should be a postscript on the preceding Psalm.
 - a. Habk. 3 has a postscript

- b. Egyptian hymns may have postscript (a colophon with summary and author, etc.), including the phrase, “to the end,” a translation which the LXX mis-translated from the Hebrew “For the Chief Musician”
 - c. Psalm 1 has no title
 - d. The title didn’t always seem to fit the tone of the Psalm
5. Payne categorically states that “[Thirtle’s] contention is now universally rejected.” Perhaps one indication is Jewish tradition in numbering the titles as verse one.
6. Skepticism on the antiquity/authenticity of the Psalm titles
- a. Conservative: (Dillard and Longman in *An Introduction to the OT*, p. 215)
 - 1) stylized, uniform formula suggests editing
 - 2) third person Psalm title while the Psalm may be in first person (Pss. 3,18,51)
 - 3) diverse manuscript attestation
 - b. Critics like Shepheard (*Interpretation*, April ’92, p. 147) say that since only the Chronicles, which are late, mention singers and choirs, therefore Psalm titles are later than the time of David, et. al.

B. Davidic authorship is claimed in the titles of 73 Psalms. The veracity of these particular titles is based on

- 1. David’s musical propensities:
 - a. Capable — II Samuel 1:17-27; 6:5
 - b. Reputation as the “sweet Psalmist” — II Sam 23:1; Amos 6:5
 - c. Involvement in initiating liturgy — I Chron. 16:4,5
- 2. 14 of the Davidic Psalm titles relate the historical occasion of the Psalm
- 3. OT historical confirmation: II Samuel 22:1ff. contains the substance of Ps. 18 and says David wrote this Psalm
- 4. NT reference
 - a. General identification of David with the Book: Lk. 20:42 (citing Ps. 110)
 - b. Several specific Psalms credited to David

- (1) Some with Davidic titles, e.g., Acts 2:25ff. (Ps. 16); Mark 12:36 (Ps. 110)
 - (2) Some without any OT ascription, e.g., Acts 4:25 (Ps. 2); Heb. 4:7 (Ps. 95). This means David wrote at least 75 of the Psalms.
- c. Other authors cited in the titles are never gainsaid by NT witness.

C. Other contributors

1. Solomon (2 Psalms: 72,127), Moses, the wise men Heman and Ethan, 23 to the clans of Korah and Asaph
2. **Orphan Psalms** without author ascription (49 Psalms).
 - a. The NT designates two of these as Davidic (A. 4:25 -> Ps. 2; Heb. 4:7 -> Ps. 95). Therefore, David composed at least one half of our 150 Psalms.
 - b. Other anonymous Psalms are surely Davidic in authorship
 - (1) Introductory Ps. 1 as the only Psalm in Book I not biblically identified with David (except for 33). Of interest is the fact that the Talmud counts the first and second Psalm as one unit; if this is accurate, Acts 4 tells who wrote much (the second half) of the unified Psalm.
 - (2) Ps. 96, 105, 106, cf. content of I Chron. 16:8-36

IV. Compilation and Order of the Book of Psalms

The **composite nature** of the book is self-evident: multiple authors, broad time spans (90 ctr. 137), separately organized sections, reduplication of Psalms between sections (e.g., 14 & 53).

A. Number of Psalms

1. The Talmud says there are 147 Psalms; Ps. 9 & 10 were one Psalm (an obvious acrostic), as well as perhaps 42 & 43, and also 114 & 115.
2. The LXX, like the modern Hebrew Bible, had 150 Psalms, with one additional Psalm, making a total of 151.
 - a. This last Ps. 151 has the superscript, **Psalm 151:1** *exwqen tou/arithmou/ exothen tou arithmou*, “gone out from (i.e., “outside”) the number,” though it

claims to be by David after fighting Goliath.

- b. Not all the LXX Psalms are broken down the same as the Hebrew OT, but are basically in the same order. Thus the Vulgate and modern RC Bible have different chapter references from what we are used to.
 - (1) Ps. 10 is attached to #9 in the LXX, thus numbering our modern Ps. 11 as Ps. 10 in the LXX. The numbering harmonizes again by Ps. 146 since our Ps. 147 is split into two psalms in the LXX.
 - (2) LXX verse numbering can be different since the superscriptions are counted as vs. 1.

B. Organization into 5 books within the book

Chapters

1-41

42-72

73-89

90-106

107-150

1. Patterned after the supreme revelation of the Pentateuch
2. Each sub-book ends in a short doxology (41:13; 72:18-20; 89:52; 106:48) except the last book which takes the entire Ps. 150 as its doxology.
 - a. In fact, the last 5 Psalms (on the Pentateuch analogy) may have been designed by someone like Ezra to serve as a “grand hallelujah” to the entire Book of Psalms in its 5 parts.
 - b. Based on authorship and setting, the last Psalm of each section may give hints to the editorship or era of compilation. Ctr., however, Ps. 72.
 - c. The fact that subsequent compilers closed their collection of Psalms with a doxology like that of David’s (41:13) suggests a self-awareness of the equal canonicity of the subsequent sub-book of Psalms. In this vein, the climax of Book 5 with its five concluding Psalms and its major doxology which summarizes worship through musical praise, may signal the close of this component of the Canon. (Ctr. DSS or LXX).
3. Suggested eras for each section
 - a. Book One (1-41)

- (1) All conservatives are agreed it is from the Davidic era, probably organized by David himself (see Ps. 41).
 - (2) Collection of more personal Psalms (e.g., 9,10,13,23)
- b. Book Two (42-72)
- (1) National interests
 - (2) Solomon is suggested by Payne
 - (a) Prob. wrote the doxology — 72:20
 - (b) Second half of this book is a collection of his father's Psalms that were not included in Book I
 - (c) Others suggest compilation during
 - i) the revival period under Josiah when there would be a renewed need for more liturgical material in the temple
 - ii) or perhaps earlier in the days of Hezekiah who had wise men to look after the preservation of Israel's literary heritage (Prov. 25:1), and who revitalized temple worship including musical responsibilities of the Levites (II Chron. 29:25-30, q.v.)
 - iii) or perhaps during/after the exile when Yaweh's Name was used with hesitation; Book Two prefers the name Elohim

Contrast 14 with 53
 40 with 70

- c. Book Three (73-89)
- (1) Psalms 74, 79, and 89:38ff. (this last one closes the collection with the doxology) make refr. to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586
 - (2) Completed by Korahites soon after destruction of Jerusalem in 586.
- d. Book Four (90-106)
- (1) Liturgical in nature
 - (2) David perhaps wrote the closing Psalm (and doxology?) 106 on basis of comparison with I Chron. 16:34-36
 - (3) Archer suggests time of Ezra/Nehemiah
- e. Book Five (107-150)

- (1) Liturgical in nature
- (2) Post-exilic Psalms included (107:2,3; 137)

C. Classification of Psalms

1. Title indications

- a. Assignment: e.g., “for the choir director”
- b. Purpose: e.g., dedication of the temple in Ps. 30
- c. Musical designation (see C.3)
 - (1) Particular melody: e.g., “Lilies,” Ps. 80
 - (2) Kind of instrument: e.g., “gittith,” Pss. 8,81,84
- d. Literary type and aim: e.g., dirge or praise?
- e. Author
- f. Occasion

Only Psalm 60 includes all these elements in the superscription, q.v. Cf. Pss. 59,54.

2. Hebrew Literary types

- a. מִזְמוֹר *Mizmor* (57X) —song to go with a stringed instrument
- b. שִׁיר *Shir* (27X) —song with emphasis on vocalization
- c. מַשְׁכֵּיל *Maskil* (13X) —didactic, contemplative poem; most of the Psalms categorized as wisdom literature fall into this category
- d. מִכְתָּם *Mikhtam* (6X) —disputed term, perhaps “atoning for sin” (Arabic and Akkadian = “covering”); these 6 are laments
- e. תְּפִלָּה *Tepillah* (5x) —a prayer
- f. תְּהִלָּה *Tehillah* (5X) —probably from *halal*; praise song

- g. שִׁגְיֹן *Shiggayon* (Ps.7) —phps. “wandering” hence irregular song; a dirge

3. Musical designations

- a. Name that Song! —illustrative melodies

(1) “The Doe of Dawn” — Ps. 22

(2) “Dove of Distant Trees” — Ps. 56

- b. For the Fat Lady or the basso profundos?

(1) עֲלֵמוֹת *Alamoth* - “For the maidens/virgins” — Ps. 46; implies young, high voices

(2) שְׁמִינִית *Sheminith* - based on word for eight? suggested for men (the lower octave)? or perhaps may indicate rhythm — 6, 12

(3) Upon גִּתִּית *Gittith* — stringed instrument from Gath —8, 81 ,84

4. Form criticism: based on alleged function of the genre rather than on content or origin

Pioneered in the Psalms by Gunkel who classified the Psalms by the following forms

- a. Personal Laments, the most common form, and national laments due to crisis (44, 74, 79, 80, 137)
- b. Hymns, for liturgy and communal praise
- c. Thanksgivings for blessings received
- d. Royal Psalms (enthronement Psalms) for support of the ruling dynasty. This classification has provoked the most speculative interpretations. (Ps. 2, 45:6,7)

D. EXCURSUS ON THE PSALMS OF ASCENT (Chpts. 120-134)

—based on Len Pine’s research from April 1990

1. Title Inscriptions

a. Hebrew Bible שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת *shir hamma`aloth*

- (1) = “Song of Going Up”
- (2) “Steps” —Ex. 20:26
- (3) “Rising thoughts” —Ezk. 11:5
- (4) “Going up” to Jerusalem on a final pilgrimage —Ezra 7:9

b. Septuagint Ὀδὲ ἀναβαθμῶν *Ode`anabathmon*

- (1) “Song of Ascents”
- (2) Also used of a flight of stairs

c. Vulgate *Canticum graduum*

- (1) Gradual songs (song of degrees for liturgical use)
- (2) Liturgical title

2. Interpretations

a. Pilgrim songs enroute to the three great feasts — cf. Is. 30:29; = most common interp in 90% of commentaries

- (1) = “Going up in elevation to Jerusalem in the hills”
- (2) Several refer to the temple or going to the temple (122, 125, 127?, etc.)
- (3) Some think the songs were sung at various stations on the trip
- (4) But Content of these Psalms does not always fit this purpose

b. Exilic traveling song on the return to Palestine?

- (1) Going up from the low river plains
- (2) Ezra 7:9 usage of מַעֲלוֹת *ma`aloth*
- (3) Several of the Psalms are from Davidic era, however, and only about ½ of them fit the context (126, 121 123-125, 132,133)

c. Fifteen Psalms sung by the priests upon the 15 steps of the temple in front of the sanctuary. = later Rabbinic tradition inferred from *Middoth* 2.5.

d. Allegorical interpretation = “ascending from earthly things to God”

- (1) popular in early and medieval church
- (2) basis of Roman Catholic liturgical use

e. “Ascent” implies a step-like progression in form and content

- (1) Based upon literary analysis first recognized by Gesenius
- (2) These Psalms would be grouped by style, then, and not historical context

- (a) Progress in the Psalm is accomplished by taking up of a preceding word or phrase and making it the basis of the following thought (e.g., 120, 121, 122, 124, 129)
- (b) This yields an accelerating rhythm
- (c) Technique varies within these Psalms; other examples are in Judges 5:3ff. and Is. 17:12; 26:5