

General Introduction

What is a Psalm?

The Psalms are poetic songs. The original collection is not named but the Rabbinical tradition uses the Hebrew title Tehillim, which means songs of praise. 58 of the psalms describe themselves as mizmor, which means a poem sung to the accompaniment of an instrument.

Our English word psalm comes from the Greek word ψαλμός (psalmos) used to translate מִזְמוֹר (mizmor), which means to pluck a stringed instrument. The Greek and English titles, therefore, pertain mostly to the form they take, while the Hebrew title, “Praises” or “Book of Praises,” reflects the content.

Understanding what the psalms are is important to understanding how to read them. Although we no longer have the music which accompanied them, their status as lyrical compositions meant to be sung has important implications for how to read and understand them. They are poetic and structured. They are designed to function communally and expressively. We will explore the significance of this as we go through the course.

Organization

Although most modern American Christians seem to work with the Psalms as a collection of individual teaching segments there is an overall structure to the Psalter. Traditionally, the Psalms have been divided into 5 books with the following organization:

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

The last Psalm in each of the first four books ends with a doxology and the final Psalm appears to function as a doxology for the entire collection. All the ancient Hebrew manuscripts have this five-book arrangement (although not always in the same order). Most scholars agree that there is a significance to the final arrangement although there are various theories as to what it is.

The volume and placement of the Davidic psalms, however, are a strong indication that the final form relates to a Messianic emphasis. Whatever the significance, we know that the individual psalms were composed over a long series of time by several authors and then arranged into their current order. We will examine the arrangement and the possible connection of that arrangement to Jesus later in the course.

The psalms generally have titles that indicate their setting and authorship. These titles are not inspired; however, they do represent an ancient tradition concerning them.

There is also some variation in how individual psalms are numbered. The differences mostly derive from differences between the ancient Hebrew manuscripts and the ancient Greek Septuagint (LXX) translation. English Protestant Bibles follow the Hebrew numbering system which is slightly different than those in Greek and Catholic Bibles. In some cases, the LXX breaks a single Hebrew psalm in two and in other cases it combines two separate Hebrew psalms into one.

The table below shows where the variations occur:

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Hebrew & English Protestant Bibles	Greek and Roman Catholic Bibles
1-8	1-8
9	9
10	9
11-113	10-112
114	113
115	113
116	114
116	115
117-146	116-145
147	146
147	147
148-150	148-150
	151 (Greek)

Authorship

When considering the traditional titles, 103 of the psalms are attributed to an individual author and 47 are anonymous. The earliest is attributed to Moses (Ps. 90) and the latest appears to date after the return from exile (Ps. 107). The final arrangement likely dates to the time of Ezra around 460 B.C. or later. The authors named in the titles are as follows in order of the number of psalms ascribed to them.

73 psalms of David

(3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 61, 63, 64, 65, 68, 69, 70, 86, 101, 102, 103, 108, 109, 110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145)

12 psalms of Asaph

(50, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83)

12 psalms of the Sons of Korah

(42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 84, 85, 87, 88*)

*Psalm 88 is also credited to Heman the Ezrahite

2 Psalms of Solomon

(72, 127)

1 Psalm of Ethan the Ezrahite

(89)

1 Psalm of Moses

(90)

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Although the titles give us clues as to their authorship and the circumstances around which they may have been written, the psalms themselves rarely contain specific historical references as to the moment of their origin. This should caution us against reading too much into the historical circumstances of their authorship as that does not seem to be a significant concern of their authors. Instead, the emphasis is often on the context of the psalmist in relationship to God. The experiences related connect with general experiences of God's people rather than to the experiences of any single person except for the messianic elements. The historical references that are there often reference the prior covenant faithfulness of God.

Understanding the Psalms

The psalms are perhaps the most widely read part of the Old Testament book. Unfortunately, they are also one of the most misunderstood. There are several important questions that arise when we try to interpret and apply the psalms today. There are several unique things about the psalms that we must take into consideration if we are to handle them properly.

The function of the psalms, however, isn't primarily to teach us new information (although they may). They function rather as a component of worship; they are designed to elicit or articulate a response. Our goal is therefore not only to better understand the psalms but to apply them in an appropriate way in our own lives. Our goal in the study of Psalms should be to use our understanding to strengthen our prayer life, our devotions, and our worship.

Psalm Types

There are several different types or sub-genre of psalms and in the next few weeks we will learn about the structure and nature of the psalms to help us understand them better. By better understanding the organization, style, and function of the psalm types we can, by God's grace, deepen our insight into them, and thus allow greater skill and freedom in using them in our own prayer and worship.

Once we complete our review of the psalm types, I will provide you with a classification chart that you can use in your further study and devotional reading.