

Psalms¹

The Authorship and Dating

The book of Psalms has 150 chapters with various authors contributing to the writing. Fifty-five chapter titles use “Psalm of David” indicating the same as author. Several New Testament writers also attribute various Psalms to David (Luke 20:42 cf. Psalm 110:1; Acts 1:16; 2:25 cf. Psalm 41:9; 16:8-11; Rom 4:6; 11:9 cf. 1:1-3; 69:22-23). In all David wrote 73 or about half of the book of Psalms.² The rest of the Psalms are credited to Moses (90), Asaph (50, 73-83), Heman (88), Ethan (89), Sons of Korah (42, 44-49, 84, 87-88), and Solomon (72, 127) while others are considered anonymous.³ The Book of Psalms is a collection of individual praises which were collected, organized (Psa 72:20) and presented into one form.

Recipients

Each Psalm serves its own specific purpose. Given the diversity of the books it may be said that Psalms were written primarily to the Hebrew community. However, some books address the gentile community.

The Purpose

The Psalms are written as personal reflections upon life. The Book of Psalms expresses joy, sorrow, anger, or anticipation. While Psalms usually divided into two different types (lament, praise)⁴, there following classifications are also recognized: 1) hymns expressing joy 2) penitential expressing sorrow 3) wisdom addressing life 4) royal focusing on David’s eternal rule 5) messianic describing messiah personally 5) imprecatory calling for God’s judgment 6) lament

¹ The title “Psalms” (ΨΑΛΜΟΣ) reflects the book’s name in the Greek Old Testament used by the Jews from about 200 BC to about 100 BC commonly referred to as the Septuagint or LXX. The alternate Greek title, *Psalterion*, is frequently used as Psalter. Both terms entered English versions through the Latin Vulgate which transliterated the Greek into the Roman Language. The Greek words, from *Psallo* “to pluck,” were used first for the playing of a stringed instrument or for the instrument itself. Later they were used to describe the song (*psalmos*) or collection of songs (*psalterion*). Luke used the full Greek title “Book of Psalms” (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20). Although the closest Hebrew word to “psalm” would be *mizmor* “a song sung to musical accompaniment,” the actual Hebrew title is תהללים (*tehillim*) “praises” or “songs of praise.” The singular form תהלה (*tehilla*) is used in the title of Ps. 145 in the sense of a hymn and occurs more than twenty times in various psalms (e.g., 9:14; 22:25; 33:1; 34:1). David Allan Hubbard William Sanford LaSor, Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey the Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, Second ed.(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996). 430.

² Although the authorship of the Davidic Psalms is contested on several grounds, Archer provides the following replies: 1) First there is the claim that David would not have written about himself in the third person (he). However, at personal references in the third person was come during ancient time. 2) Another effort to dislodge David as penman claims that David’s use of “Temple” (5, 27, 28, 63, 68, 69, 101, 138) indicates that David could not have written the claimed Psalms because David died before the Temple’s construction. However, the word for temple is used before David’s life (1 Sam 1:9; 3:3). 3) It is contended that David used Aramaisms years before the Syrian takeover. However, David was very acquainted with his northern neighbors and the habit of linguistic borrowing was high within the ancient near east. 4) It is claimed that David the King could not have had time to compose Psalter. However, David’s known ability with music and the ancient’s love for music silences this argument. Gleason L. Jr. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*(Chicago: Moody Press, 1994). 488-90.

³ Paul N. Benware, *The Essential Bible Survey of the Old Testament*(Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003). 169.

⁴ Robert Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition*(Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1998). 179.

expressing great sorrow.⁵ In general the Psalms are personal expressions of emotion that are ultimately pointed to the Lord in praise or prayer. While the Psalms are foremost personal expressions they identify with man's joys and problems and as a result work to promote continued faith in the covenantal God of Israel.

The Message

It is necessary to have an understanding of *how* the Psalms express their message. The most important issue to keep in mind when reading the Psalms is that it is written as Hebrew Poetry. Hebrew Poetry is very different than English poetry. Whereas English poetry will seek to rhyme various words with previous lines and maintain a particular meter, rhythm or cadence, Hebrew Poetry presents its message in a different manner. Hebrew poetry often works in what is called parallelisms. That is one line will state a truth and then the second or third line will promote the truth again in a variety of ways. The second or third line may simply repeat the truth word for word and then add a conclusion. Here are a few of the most common types of Hebrew Parallelisms.

Hebrew Poetry uses **synonymous parallelism** where the second line repeats the thought of the first line with different words. Take for example Psalm 3:1.

“LORD,
how are they increased that trouble me!
many *are* they that rise up against me.”

Hebrew Poetry uses **antithetical parallelism** where the second line affirms the truth of the first line but by an opposite. Consider Psalm 40:4 and Psalm 1:6

“For the LORD knoweth* the way of the righteous:
but the way of the ungodly shall perish.”

*note: the idea of *knowing* has in it salvation

Hebrew Poetry uses **climatic parallelism** where the second line repeats exactly the first line and then adds a conclusion. Consider Psalm 29: 1

“Acknowledge the LORD, you heavenly beings,
Acknowledge the LORD’S majest and power”

Hebrew Poetry uses **synthetic parallelism** where the second line repeats the thought of the first line and adds a conclusion. Ps. 95:6

Come! Let’s bow down and worship!
Let’s kneel before the LORD, our creator!

Hebrew uses **emblematic parallelism** where a figure of speech in one line and further expressed in the second line. is provided in one line and interpreted in another line. Consider Psalm 42:1.

“As the hart panteth after the water brooks,
so panteth my soul after thee, O God.”

While there are other types of parallelisms, these represent some of the most popular. Therefore, whenever you read the Psalms be aware that the author is using parallelisms to get across his central message.

⁵ Bill T. & Bryan T. Beyer Arnold, *Encountering the Old Testament*(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). 307.

Theme

Personal Responses concerning God

Outline of Psalms

An outline of the canonical psalms has been well established and for the most part scholars they accept the past structure.⁶ However, what qualifies the accepted structure is unknown. Some hold that the book is structured simply after the Pentateuch. “The division probably follows the pattern of the Pentateuch.”⁷ There is literary evidence for this as each part ends with a doxology. While admitting an obvious five part literary division, others contend that subject within each division is not cut and dry. It is then contended that the book follows a more chronically approach. “In a general way it seems that the collection of psalms reflects a chronological process.”⁸ Exactly how each Psalm fits within each of the five divisions remains unknown. However, there is large uniformity from history as well as the present that the book is divided into five separate books.⁹ It is this outline that is presented below.

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

Questions for Psalms

1. Names four contributing authors to the book of Psalms.
2. Describe the titles and their significance to authorship.
3. Do you hold that the titles are inspired? Why or why not?
4. When were most of the books written?
5. To what date could we attribute the earliest and latest book?
6. Describe the book divisions.
7. Describe the significance of “Selah.”
8. Describe the difference between English poetry and Hebrew Poetry.
9. Name some of the most prominent styles of parallelism.
10. What is the basic theme of Psalms?

⁶ Allen Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck John F. Walvoord(Grand Rapids: Victor, 1983).

⁷ William Sanford LaSor. 430.

⁸ Arnold. 404.

⁹ Archer. 487.

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