



INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS

Background Material On The Psalms

Having examined some of unique characteristics of Hebrew poetry in general, let's now focus on the book of Psalms itself.

1. The Origin Of The Word "Psalm"

The Hebrew designation of Psalms is Tehillim, meaning “praises,” a term that reflects much of the book’s content (Psalm 145, title). Its name in Latin and English Bibles, however, comes from the Greek, Psalmoi, which means “twangings (of harp strings)”, and then, as a result, songs sung to the accompaniment of harps. This latter name originated in the Septuagint (its NT authentication, Luke 20(42)) and reflects the form of the book’s poetry. The same is true of its alternate title, “Psalterion”, meaning “psaltery”, and then, a collection of harp songs, from which comes the English term “Psalter”. In New Testament worship: "...in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19)

2. The Authors Of The Psalms

David – Commonly thought to be the author of the book of Psalms, but he actually wrote only about seventy-three (73), less than half. **Asaph** – The music director during the reigns of David and Solomon (1 Chronicle 16:1-7). He wrote twelve (12) psalms.

The Sons of Korah – These were Levites who served in the Temple (1 Chronicle 26:1-19). They wrote twelve (12) psalms.

Solomon – At least two (2) psalms are attributed to him (Psalm 72, 127). That he wrote many more is stated in 1 Kings 4:29-32.

Moses – As indicated above, he wrote the earliest psalms; one is included in Psalm (Psalm 90).

Heman – Contemporary with David and Asaph, and is known as "the singer" (1 Chronicle 6:33).

He wrote one psalm (Psalm 88) that has been preserved.

Ethan – A companion with Asaph and Heman in the Temple worship (1 Chronicle 15:19). He wrote one psalm (Psalm 89).

Anonymous – The authorship of forty-eight (48) of the psalms is unknown.

3. The Arrangement Of The Psalms

The Psalms were originally collected into five "books", apparently according to the material found within them as well coinciding with weekly readings in the Temple/Tabernacle worship.

Book I Genesis (Psalm 1-41)

Book II Exodus (Psalm 42-72)

Book III Leviticus (Psalm 73-89)

Book IV Numbers (Psalm 90-106)

Book V Deuteronomy (Psalm 107-150)

4. The Psalms can also be arranged into chief "groups"

Alphabetic or Acrostic – These psalms have lines which in Hebrew start with words whose first letters follow a certain pattern. For example, in Psalm 119 the first eight lines start with words beginning with the Hebrew letter ALEPH, the second eight lines with words beginning with BETH, etc. This may have been done to aid in the memorization of the psalm.

Didactic or Ethical – These psalms teach moral principles. A good example is Psalm 15
Psalms of teaching and instruction (e.g., Psalm 1).

Hallelujah – These are psalms of praise, beginning and/or ending with "hallelujah" or "praise Jehovah". Psalm 103 is one such example.

Historical – Psalms which review the history of God's dealings with His people. A good sample would be Psalm 106.

Imprecatory – These psalms invoke God to bring punishment or judgment upon one's enemies. Consider Psalm 69 as an example.

Messianic – Psalms pertaining to the coming Messiah. For example, look at Psalm 2 or Psalm 110.

Penitential – These are psalms expressing sorrow for sins that have been committed. A classic example is David's psalm in Psalm 51.

Songs Of Ascent (or Songs Of Degrees) – These psalms were possibly sung by pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem to observe the feasts. They are grouped together as Psalms 120-134.

Suffering – These psalms are cries of those suffering affliction. Psalm 102 is a typical example.

Thanksgiving – Psalms of grateful praise to Jehovah for blessings received. For example, take a look at Psalm 100.

The various "styles" of the psalms can be described as

Liturgical – Responsive readings, for use in special services (e.g., Psalm 136).

Meditation – The ancient Hebrews were given to meditation, which spirit finds expression in many of the psalms (e.g., Psalm 119).

Praise and Devotion – Psalms of joyful praise (e.g., Psalm 148).

Prayer and Petition – Psalms which were sung in an attitude of prayer (e.g., Psalm 51).

Introduction

The value of the Old Testament to the Christian is expressed several times in the New Testament: Why Study The Psalms? As Christians, we are commanded to utilize the Psalms:

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; **Ephesians 5:19**

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. **Colossians 3:16**

Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. **James 5:13**

Thus the Psalms are useful for singing praises to God. They are also useful for teaching and confirming that Jesus is the Christ or Messiah. Note the use Jesus made of them (Luke 24:44-47), and also Peter's use of them in his first gospel sermon (Acts 2:25-28,34-35).

5. Characteristics Of Hebrew Poetry

Before we get into the background of the Psalms themselves, it may prove beneficial to consider some things about Hebrew poetry. Not only will this help to better understand the nature of the Psalms, but it can also assist in proper interpretation of this portion of Scripture. One of the things that makes Hebrew poetry different is

The Use Of "Thought Rhyme"

Much modern poetry has standard measures of identifiable rhythm, as in the poem "Mary Had A Little Lamb." With the Hebrews, however, the art of poetic rhythm was of secondary consideration. Some suggest that it is not likely that the Hebrew poets had standard measures, worked out and carefully defined. Again, their focus was on "thought rhyme," not "word rhyme." Also known as "parallelism", thought rhyme involves arranging thoughts in relation to each other. This is done without a concern as to whether certain words rhyme with each other (as found in most modern poetry). In the Psalms, we find several different kinds of thought rhyme:

- a. **Synonymous parallelism** – The thought of first line is repeated in the For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish. (note the contrast)
- b. **Synthetic parallelism** – The first and second lines bear some definite relation to each other (such as cause and effect, or proposition and conclusion). A good example is Psalm 119:11
- c. **Thy word have I hid in mine heart,** (cause)
- d. **that I might not sin against thee.** (effect)
- e. **Progressive parallelism** – There are several varieties of this form, the most common being:
Stair-like - Composed of several lines, each providing a complete element of the aggregate or composite thought. Notice Psalm 1:1
- f. Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.(note the progression)
- g. **Climactic** – Here the principal idea in the first line is repeated and expanded to complete the thought. An example is found in Psalm 29:1
- h. Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty, (give what?)
- i. Give unto the LORD glory and strength. (the answer)
- j. **Introverted parallelism** – The first line is closely related in thought to the fourth, and the second to the third. For example, consider Psalm 91:14
Because he has set his love upon Me, (note line 4)
therefore I will deliver him; (note line 3)
I will set him on high, (note line 2)
because he has known My name. (note line 1)

It is often fascinating to note how creative the Hebrew poets were as they composed their poetry using "thought rhyme" rather than "word rhyme". In some cases it even helps in interpreting difficult expressions or phrases. Another characteristic of Hebrew poetry is... Finally, an important characteristic of Hebrew poetry is...

6. The Use Of Figurative Expression

The Psalms are filled with figurative expressions, and as such it is important to keep certain principles of interpretation in mind...

a. The figure must be accepted and dealt with as a figure of speech, not as a literal statement. For example, in Psalm 18:31, the Lord is called "a rock." He is like a rock, but not one literally. In Psalm 51:4, David says "Against You, You only, have I sinned." Yet he is confessing his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, in which he sinned not only against the Lord, but against his wife, against Uriah, and many others. David was speaking figuratively for the sake of expressing his deep grief in sinning against God, and we must allow for figurative expressions including hyperbole in poetic writings. One needs to be careful and not develop doctrinal beliefs upon what may be figurative expressions not intended to be taken literally.

b. The figure must be interpreted in light of its meaning in the setting in which it was used. For example, in Psalm 23:4, we find the well-known phrase: "the valley of the shadow of death." It is not uncommon to hear the phrase applied at funerals to the act of dying. In the setting of the psalm, however, it refers to a treacherous place (such as a steep valley, where deep shadows can easily cause a misstep resulting in death), where the guiding hand of a shepherd would be very helpful to sheep to avoid death. It is therefore applicable to any time one is in perilous straits and in need of God's guiding hand.

Appreciating these characteristics of Hebrew poetry can help the Psalms become more meaningful, and understanding these characteristics can also help avoid misinterpreting the Psalms to teach doctrines the psalmist had no intention of teaching!

7. The Titles are also important and give the following:

- a. An indication of who composed the psalm.
- b. A note about the type of psalm.
- c. A historical note concerning the occasion which gave rise to the writing of the psalm.
- d. A note about the musical accompaniment or melodies to be used with the psalm.
- e. A statement of the worship setting in which the psalm is intended to be used.

