

"THE BOOK OF PSALMS" Introduction To The Psalms

INTRODUCTION

- A. The value of the OT to the Christian is expressed several times in the NT (Rom. 15:4; 1Cor. 10:11).
(Rom 15:4) For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.
(1Cor 10:11) Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.
- B. Paul reminded Timothy of the importance of the OT scriptures he had learned as a child (2Tim. 3:14-17).
But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. **16** All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
- C. Of the books of the OT, this is especially true of the book of Psalms! The value of the Psalms for the Christian is so great, we should do what we can to become more familiar with them. Allow me to elaborate...

WHY STUDY THE PSALMS?

- A. As Christians, we are commanded to utilize the Psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Jas. 5:13).
(Eph. 5:19) Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,
(Col 3:16) 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.
(Jas 5:13) Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.
- B. 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 (Lk 24:44-47), and also Peter's use of them in his first gospel sermon (Ac 2:25-28,34-35).
- C. It has been said that in the Psalms one finds "expressed the eager yearning and longing for God's presence". It certainly contains "prayers and songs of joyous trust and praise." Indeed, every emotion known to man is expressed in beautiful and inspired terms (e.g., joy, anger, praise, repentance, trust, even doubt). Filled with some emotion for which you cannot find the words to express it? It is likely you will find it expressed in the book of Psalms!
- D. I would therefore suggest that the Psalms are capable of serving as:
The Christian's "hymnal" to assist us in our praise to God.
The Christian's "prayer book" in which we learn how to approach God in prayer.
The Christian's "book of evidences" to strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ.
The Christian's "training guide" for living holy and righteous lives before God.

THE AIM OF THIS STUDY

It is my prayer that as we study this book we will accomplish the following goals:

- A. Become more familiar with Old Testament poetry.
This is essential to getting more out the Psalms, and important if we are to avoid misinterpreting them.
- B. Develop an appreciation and working knowledge of the Psalms.
So one may utilize them for his or her own comfort and encouragement, and in counseling and comforting others.
- C. Glean a clearer picture of God's character.
To better understand His love, mercy and deliverance towards the righteous, but also His wrath and judgment against the wicked.

D. Learn more of the Christ in prophecy.

To note descriptions of His suffering and glorious reign found in the Psalms, some of which are not found elsewhere in Scripture.

E. Consider examples of fulfilled prophecies.

To see in fulfilled prophecy irrefutable arguments for the inspiration of the Scriptures, and for the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah

These are just a few of the reasons why the Book of Psalms should be read and studied by every Christian, and hopefully this study will help to meet these objectives.

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...

A. **The Use Of "Thought 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:

B. **Synonymous parallelism.**

The thought of first line is repeated in the second line, expressed in different words for the sake of emphasis. A good example is found in 24:2. Same idea in line two, just reworded.

*For He has founded it upon the seas,
And established it upon the waters.*

C. **Antithetical parallelism.**

The truth presented in one line is strengthened by a contrasting statement in the next line. Consider this example from 1:6. Notice the contrast.

*For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.*

D. **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 119:11. Line one is the cause, line two the effect.

*Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You!*

E. **Progressive parallelism.**

There are several varieties of this form, the most common being:

1. **Stair-like.**

Composed of several lines, each providing a complete element of the aggregate or composite thought. Notice the progression in 1:1.

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;*

2. **Climatic.**

Here the principal idea in the first line is repeated and expanded to complete the thought. An example is found in 29:1. Line one asks a question, line two is the answer.

*Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones
Give unto the LORD glory and strength.*

3. **Introverted parallelism.**

The first line is closely related in thought to the fourth, and the second to the third. For example, consider 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.

F. **The Lack Of Poetic Rhythm.**

1. 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."

G. **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...

1. **The figure must be dealt with as a figure of speech, not as a literal statement.**
For example, in 18:31, the Lord is called "a rock." He is like a rock, but not one literally. In 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.
2. **The figure must be interpreted in light of its meaning in the setting in which it was used.**
For example, in 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!

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...

A. **The Origin Of The Word "Psalm."**

1. The Greek word is "psalmos", from the Hebrew word "zmr" meaning "to pluck"; i.e., taking hold of the strings of an instrument with the fingers. It implies that the psalms were originally composed to be accompanied by a stringed instrument. "Psalms are songs for the lyre, and therefore lyric poems in the strictest sense."(Delitzsch, Psalms, Vol. I, p. 7) David and others therefore originally wrote the Psalms to be sung to the accompaniment of the harp.
2. In NT worship, we are told to sing the psalms to the accompaniment of the heart (Eph 5:19).
[...in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.](#)
3. The phrase, "making melody," comes from the Greek word "psallontes" (literally, plucking the strings of). Therefore, we are to "pluck the strings of our heart" as we sing the psalms (i.e., to sing with emotion).

B. The History Of The Psalms.

1. The oldest of the Psalms originate from the time of Moses (1400BC). We have three psalms penned by Moses:
 - a. Exodus 15:1-15 a song of triumph following the crossing of the Red Sea.
 - b. Deut 32, 33 - a song of exhortation to keep the Law after entering Canaan.
 - c. Psalm 90; a song of meditation, reflection, and prayer.
2. After Moses, David (1000BC), the sacred lyric attained to its full maturity.
3. With Solomon, the creation of psalms began to decline; this was "the age of the proverb."
4. Only twice after this did the creation of psalms rise to any height, and then only for a short period: under Jehoshaphat (875 BC) and again under Hezekiah (725 BC).

C. The Authors Of The Psalms.

1. David.
Commonly thought to be the author of the book of Psalms, but he actually wrote only about seventy-three (73), less than half.
2. Asaph.
The music director during the reigns of David and Solomon (1Chr 16:1-7). He wrote twelve (12) psalms.
3. The Sons of Korah.
These were Levites who served in the Temple (1Chr 26:1-19). They wrote twelve (12) psalms.
4. Solomon.
At least two (2) psalms are attributed to him (72, 127). That he wrote many more is stated in 1Kgs. 4:29-32.
5. Moses.
As indicated above, he wrote the earliest psalms; one included is 90.
6. Heman.
Contemporary with David and Asaph, and is known as "the singer" (1Chr 6:33). He wrote one psalm (88) that has been preserved.
7. Ethan.
A companion with Asaph and Heman in the Temple worship (1Chr. 15:19). He wrote 89.
8. Anonymous.
The authorship of forty-eight (48) of the psalms is unknown.

D. The Arrangement of the Psalms.

The Psalms were originally collected into five "**books**", apparently according to the material found within them...

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

E. The Topical Arrangement of the Psalms.

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

1. Alphabetic or Acrostic.
These psalms have lines which in Hebrew start with words whose first letters follow a certain pattern. For example, in 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.
2. Ethical.
These psalms teach moral principles. A good example is 15.

3. Hallelujah.
These are psalms of praise, beginning and/or ending with "hallelujah" or "praise Jehovah". Psalm 103 is one such example.
 4. Historical.
Psalms which review the history of God's dealings with His people. A good sample is 106.
 5. Imprecatory.
These psalms invoke God to bring punishment or judgment upon one's enemies. See 69.
 6. Messianic.
Psalms pertaining to the coming Messiah. For example, look at 2 or 110.
 7. Penitential.
These are psalms expressing sorrow for sins that have been committed. See 51.
 8. 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 120-134.
 9. Suffering.
These psalms are cries of those suffering affliction. Psalm 102 is a typical example.
 10. Thanksgiving.
Psalms of grateful praise to Jehovah for blessings received. See 100.
- F. **The Styles of the Psalms.**
The various "**styles**" of the psalms can be described as...
1. Didactic.
Psalms of teaching and instruction (see 1).
 2. Liturgical.
Responsive readings, for use in special services (136).
 3. Meditation.
The ancient Hebrews were given to meditation, which spirit finds expression in many of the psalms (e.g., 119).
 4. Praise and Devotion.
Psalms of joyful praise (e.g., 148).
 5. Prayer and Petition.
Psalms which were sung in an attitude of prayer (e.g., 51).

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, this brief background of the Book Of Psalms will help one gain a better feel and appreciation for this type of Scripture.