Introduction to the book of PSALMS

The usual Hebrew title of the work is Tehillim (תהלים), or Sepher Tehillim ( ספרתהלים); literally, “Praises,” or “Book of Praises”—a title which expresses well the general character of the pieces whereof the book is composed, but which cannot be said to be universally applicable to them. Another Hebrew title, and one which has crept into the text itself, is Tephilloth (תפילות), “Prayers,” which is given at the close of the second section of the work (Ps. 72:20), as a general designation of the pieces contained in the first and second sections. The same word appears, in the singular, as the special heading of the seventeenth, eighty-sixth, ninetieth, hundred and second, and hundred and forty-second psalms. But, like Tehillim, this term is only applicable, in strictness, to a certain number of the compositions which the work contains. Conjointly, however, the two terms, which come to us with the greatest amount of authority, are fairly descriptive of the general character of the work, which is at once highly devotional and specially intended to set forth the praises of God.

It is manifest, on the face of it, that the work is a collection. A number of separate poems, the production of different persons, and belonging to different periods, have been brought together, either by a single editor, or perhaps by several distinct editors, and have been united into a volume, which has been accepted by the Jewish, and, later on, by the Christian, Church, as one of the “books” of Holy Scripture. The poems seem originally to have been, for the most part, quite separate and distinct; each is a whole in itself; and most of them appear to have been composed for a special object, and on a special occasion. Occasionally, but very seldom, one psalm seems linked on to another; and in a few instances there are groups of psalms intentionally attached together, as the group from Ps. 73 to 83, ascribed to Asaph, and, again, the “Hallelujah” group—from Ps. 146 to 150. But generally no connection is apparent, and the sequence seems, so to speak, accidental.

Our own title of the work—“Psalms,” “The Psalms,” “The Book of Psalms”—has come to us, through the Vulgate, from the Septuagint. Ψαλμοί meant, in the Alexandrian Greek, “a poem to be sung to a stringed instrument;” and as the poems of the Psalter were thus sung in the Jewish worship, the name Ψαλμοί appeared appropriate. It is not, however, a translation of either Tehillim or Tephilloth, and it has the disadvantage of dropping altogether the spiritual character of the compositions. As, however, it was applied to them, certainly by St. Luke (20:42; Acts 1:20) and St. Paul (Acts 13:33), and possibly by our Lord (Luke 24:44), we may rest content with the appellation. It is, at any rate, one which is equally applicable to all the pieces whereof the “book” is composed.¹

The Title

The name ‘Psalms’ means ‘songs to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument’. It is taken from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which used the title ‘Psalmoi’. The Hebrew title for the book was ‘Tehillim’, which means ‘praise songs’.2

Authorship

The psalms were composed over a period of approximately 900 years, with the earliest being written by Moses (Ps. 90) and the latest written by various author after the Babylonian Captivity (e.g. Ps. 126; 147).

The psalms are primarily associated with David because he wrote most of them as the following breakdown indicates:

**DAVID**—73 (PS 3–9; 11–32; 34–41; 41–65; 68–70; 86; 101; 103; 108–110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138–145)

**DAVID**—beloved, the eighth and youngest son of Jesse, a citizen of Bethlehem. His father seems to have been a man in humble life. His mother’s name is not recorded. Some think she was the Nahash of 2 Sam. 17:25. As to his personal appearance, we only know that he was red-haired, with beautiful eyes and a fair face (1 Sam. 16:12; 17:42).

His early occupation was that of tending his father’s sheep on the uplands of Judah. From what we know of his after history, doubtless he frequently beguiled his time, when thus engaged, with his shepherd’s flute, while he drank in the many lessons taught him by the varied scenes spread around him. His first recorded exploits were his encounters with the wild beasts of the field. He mentions that with his own unaided hand he slew a lion and also a bear, when they came out against his flock, beating them to death in open conflict with his club (1 Sam. 17:34, 35).3

**ASAPH**—12 (PS 50; 73–83) ASAPH—convener, or collector. (1.) A Levite; one of the leaders of David’s choir (1 Chr. 6:39). Psalms 50 and 73–83 inclusive are attributed to him. He is mentioned along with David as skilled in music, and a “seer” (2 Chr. 29:30). The “sons of Asaph,” mentioned in 1 Chr. 25:1, 2 Chr. 20:14, and Ezra 2:41, were his descendants, or more probably a class of poets or singers who recognized him as their master. (2.) The “recorder” in the time of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:18, 37). (3.) The “keeper of the king’s forest,” to whom Nehemiah requested from Artaxerxes a “letter” that he might give him timber for the temple at Jerusalem (Neh. 2:8).4

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DESCENDANTS OF KORAH—10 (PS 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87)

KORAH—ice, hail. (1.) The third son of Esau, by Aholibamah (Gen. 36:14; 1 Chr. 1:35).

(2.) A Levite, the son of Izhar, the brother of Amram, the father of Moses and Aaron (Ex. 6:21). The institution of the Aaronic priesthood and the Levitical service at Sinai was a great religious revolution. The old priesthood of the heads of families passed away. This gave rise to murmurings and discontent, while the Israelites were encamped at Kadesh for the first time, which came to a head in a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, headed by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Two hundred and fifty princes, “men of renown” i.e., well-known men from among the other tribes, joined this conspiracy. The whole company demanded of Moses and Aaron that the old state of things should be restored, alleging that “they took too much upon them” (Num. 16:1–3). On the morning after the outbreak, Korah and his associates presented themselves at the door of the tabernacle, and “took every man his censer, and put fire in them, and laid incense thereon.” But immediately “fire from the Lord” burst forth and destroyed them all (Num. 16:35). Dathan and Abiram “came out and stood in the door of their tents, and their wives, and their sons, and their little children,” and it came to pass “that the ground clave asunder that was under them; and the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up.” A plague thereafter began among the people who sympathized in the rebellion, and was only stayed by Aaron’s appearing between the living and the dead, and making “an atonement for the people” (16:47).

The descendants of the sons of Korah who did not participate in the rebellion afterwards rose to eminence in the Levitical service.

KORAHITES—that portion of the Kohathites that descended from Korah. (1.) They were an important branch of the singers of the Kohathite division (2 Chr. 20:19). There are eleven psalms (42–49; 84; 85; 87; 88) dedicated to the sons of Korah.

(2.) Some of the sons of Korah also were “porters” of the temple (1 Chr. 9:17–19); one of them was over “things that were made in the pans” (31), i.e., the baking in pans for the meat-offering (Lev. 2:5).

SOLOMON—peaceful, (Heb. Shelomoh)—2 (PS 72; PS 127),

David’s second son by Bathsheba, i.e., the first after their legal marriage (2 Sam. 12). He was probably born about B.C. 1035 (1 Chr. 22:5; 29:1). He succeeded his father on the throne in early manhood, probably about sixteen or eighteen years of age.

ETHAN—firm. 1 (PS 89)

(1.) “The Ezrahite,” distinguished for his wisdom (1 Kings 4:31). He is named as the author of the 89th Psalm. He was of the tribe of Levi.

(2.) A Levite of the family of Merari, one of the leaders of the temple music (1 Chr. 6:44; 15:17, 19). He was probably the same as Jeduthun. He is supposed by some to be the same also as (1).


HEMAN—faithful. 1 (PS 88)
(1.) 1 Kings 4:31; 1 Chr. 2:6, a son of Zerah, noted for his wisdom. (2.) Grandson of Samuel (1 Chr. 6:33; 15:17), to whom the 88th Psalm probably was inscribed. He was one of the “seers” named in 2 Chr. 29:14, 30, and took a leading part in the administration of the sacred services. 8

MOSES—1 (PS 90)
MOSES—drawn (or Egypt. mesu, “son;” hence Rameses, royal son).

ANONYMOUS—50 (Many of these may also have been written by David. For example, Acts 4:25 attributes Psalm 2 to David.)

Divisions

The psalms fall into five ‘books’:

- **BOOK I**—1–41 (41 psalms)
- **BOOK II**—42–72 (31 psalms)
- **BOOK III**—73–89 (17 psalms)
- **BOOK IV**—90–106 (17 psalms)
- **BOOK V**—107–150 (44 psalms)

Each of these ‘books’ ends with an emphatic and triumphant burst of praise (41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6).

Some have suggested that each corresponds thematically to the first five books of the Bible—the books of Moses. Because Book I emphasizes the themes of creation, sin and salvation, it supposedly corresponds to Genesis which prominently displays those same themes. Furthermore, because the psalms of Book II are weighted with the theme of redemption, it is said to correspond to the Book of Exodus.

This arrangement connects Book III with Leviticus because of their common emphasis on the sanctuary, Book IV with Numbers because of the prominence in each of Moses and Israel’s wandering in the wilderness and Book V with Deuteronomy because of the emphasis in each on the Word of God.

This arrangement has the appearance of having been carried into the psalms instead of having been carried out of them. How easy it is to fall in love with some sort of scheme that comes to mind and then try to make the Scriptures fit!

Superscriptions

A good number of the psalms—116 to be exact—include either a historical or musical heading. The former gives us the situation in which the psalmist found himself when he sat down to write. The first of these is Psalm 3, which says, ‘A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son.’ The latter gives instructions on how the psalm was to be played. The first

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musical heading is found in Psalm 4: ‘To the Chief Musician. With stringed instruments. A Psalm of David.’

**Selah Psalms**

The word ‘Selah’ appears seventy-four times in forty psalms. This word signifies a pause or interlude. It may have been used to inform musicians to change instruments or to call for both musicians and listeners to ponder the truth that had been sung. In the public reading of the psalms, we honour each ‘Selah’, not by actually saying the word, but rather by pausing.

**Types of poetry**

The psalms display primarily three types of poetry.

- **Synonymous parallelism** is on display when the second line of a poem uses similar words to express the same thought as the first line. An example of this is:
  
  “O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger,
  Nor chasten me in your hot displeasure” (Ps 6:1).

- **Antithetical parallelism** takes us to the other end of the spectrum. Here the second line expresses the opposite of the first:
  
  “The wicked borrows and does not repay,
  But the righteous shows mercy and gives” (Ps 37:21).

- **Synthetic parallelism** occurs when the second line carries further or expands the first line:
  
  “God is our refuge and strength,
  A very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1).

- **Ascending parallelism** takes place when succeeding lines repeat some words from the first line and complete the thought:
  
  “Our fathers trusted in you;
  They trusted, and you delivered them.
  They cried to you, and were delivered;
  They trusted in you, and were not ashamed.” (Ps22:4–5).

**Our need for the psalms**

Why should we concern ourselves with the Book of Psalms? Yes, it is the longest book in the Bible—much longer than its closest competitor, Isaiah. It is the only book of the Bible that was written by many authors. It contains both the longest and shortest chapters of the Bible, 119 and 117 respectively. It is the Old Testament book most frequently quoted by New Testament writers. It contains much by way of soothing language.

These are some of the features that lend interest and fascination to the book, but its true significance lies in its timeless message. And what is its message? The Book of Psalms, as is the case with every other book of the Bible, is a message about the Lord Jesus Christ. We must find the Lord Jesus here because he found himself here. As he walked with two of his disciples on the day of his resurrection, Jesus ‘expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning

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himself” (Luke 24:27). Later that day he appeared to other disciples and said: ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me’ (Luke 24:44). All of Scripture is about the Lord Jesus Christ and his redeeming work, and that includes the psalms! But where do we find him in the psalms? In prophecy! There are more prophecies of Christ in the psalms than any other book of the Old Testament! Some of these, as we shall see, are so very detailed and precise that they appear to be the descriptions of those actually viewing the events instead of foretelling them hundreds of years before.

*The Open Bible* gives the following helpful list of specific messianic references in the psalms:

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<th>Prophecy</th>
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<td>16:10</td>
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<td>Luke 22:47</td>
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We need the psalms, then, because they point us to Christ, who is the source of our salvation. But we also need them because they describe the life of the saved—that is, the qualities that those who have faith in Christ are to seek and to practice. More specifically, the psalms:

- **TEACH US TO BE MUCH OCCUPIED WITH GOD.** They magnify and exalt him as the Sovereign Creator and Ruler of the universe. What is it to be much occupied with God? It is ‘… to treasure his Word, to delight in his worship, to reflect on his glorious attributes, to rehearse his great acts in history, to trust in his care, to glory in his gospel and to anticipate his final victory. The more occupied with God we are, the more strength we find for living.’

- **TEACH US TO PRAISE GOD** and show us how to praise him. There are few lessons that we more need. So very often we mumble mechanical praise from hearts that are crowded with unworthy loves and occupied with earthly concerns. The need is for robust praise from hearts that are deeply schooled in the stunning truths of the Sovereign Lord who not only made us but pours from his bounty countless blessings, the chief of which is eternal salvation through his Son.

- **TEACH US TO HAVE FAITH IN GOD** in our afflictions and to receive comfort from him. They express every human emotion and address every human need. John R. W. Stott writes: ‘The reason why Christian people are drawn to the psalms is that they speak the universal language of the human soul … Whatever our spiritual mood may be, there is sure to be a psalm which reflects it—whether triumph or defeat, excitement or depression, joy or sorrow, praise or penitence, wonder or anger.’

  We might say the psalms show us how to respond to every conceivable situation that life throws at us. William Hendriksen notes: ‘In the psalms the believer pours out his heart before Jehovah. Accordingly, expressions of repentance, communion, hope, faith, love, etc., abound. There are psalms for every occasion in life and for every spiritual condition, so that the Psalter is universal in its appeal to believing hearts.’

- **TEACH US TO HAVE ZEAL FOR GOD’S CAUSE.** From hearts flooded with love for God, the various psalmists expressed fervent desires to see the advancement of God’s truth, the vindication of his name, the acknowledgement of his glory and the triumph of his kingdom. All of this requires, as the imprecatory psalms so wonderfully comprehend, the defeat of evil and the judgement of evil-doers.

  Such zeal for God constitutes a stinging rebuke to all those professing believers who have been afflicted with ‘spectatoritis’. This malady turns people into mere church-goers who attend to get some kind of ‘fix’—a little shot of something to make them feel good about themselves, all, of course, laced with lots of fun and humour.

- **TEACH US TO VALUE AND PRACTICE** both public worship and private devotion. The psalms throb with both kinds of worship. The former is vigorously endorsed in the pilgrimage psalms, as well as in other types. And the latter is modelled by individual psalmists who, even in the midst of heart-wrenching circumstances, find their hearts going out after God in praise and adoration.

We begin our study at Creekside Estates using the “Topical” approach. Each of the Psalms are grouped by the topic they address. We will study one or two Psalms in each topic and the others in each topic will be read by the participants in their own time during the week. You can find the schedule of the topical studies on our WEB site: [www.biblebob.com](http://www.biblebob.com).