

Introduction to Psalms

The Psalms continue to have an enormous influence on people's lives all round the world and down the centuries they have brought comfort and encouragement to countless millions of people. Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, died in a plane crash in 1961. His briefcase was recovered from the crash site and among the items it contained were a copy of the New Testament and the Book of Psalms.¹

In the New Testament the most quoted book of the Old Testament is the Psalms.² Jesus clearly committed them to memory and found them speaking to him and for him concerning his ministry in life and death. The Apostles turned to the Psalms in their preaching as well as when praying for boldness in the face of strong persecution. Following the example set by our Lord, the writers of the New Testament saw them as pointers to the person and work of Christ (Acts 2:25–35; 4:11; 24–31; 13:33–36).

Psalms were sung by the early Christians and prayers and songs were offered to God in accord with the pattern set by the Psalms and the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 6:9–13; Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19–20; Colossians 3:16; James 5:13). In the early second century Christian teachers like Clement, bishop of Rome around AD 96, were using the Psalms to point to Christ, while Ignatius in Syrian Antioch around AD 100 introduced the singing of the Psalms antiphonally. Expositions and commentaries on the Psalms dating from the third century onwards have been preserved and early

testimonies indicate the place of the Psalms in Christian devotion in the home and individual people's lives in their workplace as well as in communal worship. Among the famous commentators on the Psalms in the early period stand Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa (354–430) and Cassiodorus, a Roman writer and statesman, who in his retirement founded a monastery (c. 485–580).

Some of the statements made about the Psalms show how important they have been to Christians throughout history. Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 295–373) called the Psalms 'an epitome of the whole Scripture and is reported to have said that 'Most of Scripture speaks to us, the Psalms speak for us.' Basil, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (c. 329–379) regarded the Psalms as 'the compendium of all theology'. Martin Luther (1483–1546), who began lecturing on the Psalms in 1513, spoke of the book as 'a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament'. For John Calvin (1509–1564), who first preached on the Psalms and then wrote a commentary on the Hebrew text which is still of immense value, the book is 'An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul' and he explained that 'the Holy Spirit has brought to life all the grief, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which our minds are agitated'.

The Name

There are two English names given to the book and both are derived via the Latin Bible from the Greek version. The most popular name is 'Book of Psalms', as in our English Bibles, which is the heading to the psalm collection in the 4th century AD Vaticanus manuscript of the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint (see also Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20). To the Greeks the term 'Psalm' meant music produced by a stringed instrument and was used to translate the equivalent Hebrew term found in many of the headings to individual psalms (see Psalm 3). It referred originally to a song accompanied by musical instruments. By New Testament times it seems to be just another name for a 'song' that Christians used (1 Corinthians 14:26). The other English name for the book is 'Psalter', which is the heading in the 5th century AD Alexandrinus manuscript of the Septuagint and was perhaps a term that emphasised the instrument used such as a harp. In the Hebrew Bible from earliest times the Rabbis called the psalm collection, 'Praises' (see Psalm 145 where the singular is found in the psalm's heading). No title does justice to the wide range

of compositions in the collection that include prayers of lament and thanksgiving, teaching and wisdom psalms, in addition to hymns of praise.

The Psalm Headings

Many of the psalms have introductory headings that mention the author or a particular collection. Sometimes the heading will give an idea of when it was written (Psalms 3 and 51); it will indicate whether it is a song or a word of instruction and it may suggest the instruments to be used and perhaps even an appropriate tune (Psalms 4–9). Similar notifications are also found outside the Psalter, as in the introduction to David's thanksgiving psalm (2 Samuel 22:1) and in the heading and postscript to Habakkuk's psalm (Habakkuk 3:1,19). Some of these headings, as well as the word 'Selah' that appears at the end of some verses (see Psalm 3), may not be original to the psalm but they are certainly very early and were present when the final edition was made. In the Hebrew Bible these headings are seen as part of the text and regarded as the first verse. Our English versions do not follow this custom and it results in the English text being one verse behind the Hebrew original in many of the psalms. For example, Psalm 3 verse 1 in our English Bibles is verse 2 in the original text. What the Hebrew text indicates is that the headings are to be treated as part of God's Word and not ignored or dismissed out of hand. These headings must be clearly distinguished from the attempts in some Bible versions to provide titles to indicate a psalm's content.

The Psalm Collection

There are individual psalms that span almost a thousand years from Moses (Psalm 90) to the time when the Jews experienced exile in Babylon (Psalm 137) and perhaps even afterwards. At least half the psalms are associated with David, the 'sweet psalmist of Israel' (2 Samuel 23:1; see Psalms 3–32; 34–41; 51–65; 68–70; 86; 101; 103; 108–110; 138–145) and there are numerous psalms belonging to Korah and Asaph (Psalms 42–50; 73–83; 84–85; 87–88).

A distinction must be made between the individual compositions and the final editing process that occurred in the post-exilic period perhaps during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah or when Chronicles was written. The person or persons used by God to bring the whole collection together found various psalms already bundled together

under personal names like David and Asaph or the Sons of Korah. At the end of Psalm 72 we are informed that the ‘prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended’ and yet further psalms associated with David appear later as noted above.

The collection of 150 psalms in our Bibles is divided into five parts (called ‘books’), each terminating with a doxology—Psalms 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; 107–150. This division was probably influenced by the Law of Moses which also consists of five books. Psalms 1 and 2 provide a fitting opening to the whole collection with the final Hallelujah psalms (Psalm 146–150) forming a grand conclusion.

The way the psalms have been collected into this final fivefold form suggests the compiler had an important aim in mind for his people living as they were under foreign domination and still awaiting the fulfilment of promises God had made to Abraham and David. It encouraged God’s people to look with confidence to their covenant God as the universal ruler who would bring to completion everything that he had purposed and prophesied.

Book One focuses on David, the highs and lows of his life and how God delivered such a one who belongs to the poor, oppressed righteous community. It also draws our attention to God’s law and the importance of trusting God and coming into his presence. In Book Two the promises God made to David provide the background and are coupled to the importance of Zion and worship at the central sanctuary. God’s deliverances are again prominent and it ends with a view of the universal reign of David’s greater son. Book Three introduces a sobering note and suggests that the exile is in mind. Israel’s covenant failures are prominent and the promises to David are in jeopardy. The curses of God on account of Israel’s rebellion are brought to our attention and yet positive things are still said of Zion which give grounds for hope. In Book Four with the exile still in the compiler’s thoughts, God’s kingship is highlighted with summaries of his powerful activities throughout history and it ends with prayer for a return from Israel’s exile. Book Five reflects the post-exilic era with an emphasis on restoration and renewal. God’s steadfast love is often mentioned and a series of psalms attributed to David are also included. We are given a glimpse of the future Davidic ruler who will have priestly functions, and worship in Zion is prominent. The oppressed righteous do eventually receive justice and the enemies of God and his people are punished so that at the close of the collection, as in the book

of Revelation, the ‘hallelujah chorus’ can resound to the glory of God (Psalm 150; see Revelation 19:1–6).

A clear distinction exists between the first three books (Psalms 1–89) and the final two (Psalms 90–150). In the first three almost all the psalms have headings and many give fulsome information concerning authorship, historical background, the type of psalm it is—whether a song or for instruction—and with details concerning instruments for accompaniment and with reference to the chief musician. On the other hand, the last two books in comparison have few headings and those that do have titles, give little information. Again, in the first three books laments predominate whereas the final two are characterised by thanksgiving and praise.

Holy Scripture

The Psalms head up the third part of the Jewish Scriptures, which is perhaps the reason Jesus specifically speaks of the Law, the Prophets and Psalms as he shows his disciples from the whole of the Old Testament the things relating to himself (Luke 24:27,44–46). This unique collection of psalms is therefore God-breathed Scripture. More noticeable than in other parts of the Bible, the human authorship is very pronounced so that we are made aware of the various moods and concerns of so many of the individual authors. Nevertheless, the whole collection is part of the written Word of God and its purpose, like the rest of Holy Scripture, is to make people wise about salvation through faith in Jesus the Messiah and profitable for God’s people in the development of their spiritual lives (2 Timothy 3:15–17).

Psalms Types

It is helpful to be aware of the main types and to show their distinctive characteristics but it must be remembered that some psalms defy the pigeon-hole treatment and many do not fit neatly into their ‘box’ but display features belonging to other types as well.

Praise psalms—The typical praise psalm can be clearly identified. It begins with a call to worship and gives reasons why praise should be offered. Grounds for praise are often introduced by the word translated ‘for’ or ‘because’. It can also have a concluding call to praise. Examples of this type are Psalms 33, 96, 100, 117, 147. Included within the praise group are the kingship, royal and Zion psalms. The kingship psalms such as Psalms 29, 47, 93, 97–99 proclaim God’s rule and a number

of them begin with the declaration ‘The LORD reigns’. Royal psalms or psalms relating to the Lord’s anointed include Psalms 2, 45, 72, 89, 110 and 132 but psalms belonging to other types can be included such as Psalms 18, 20–21, 101 and 144. Zion songs draw attention to the significance of God’s city (see Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122).

Prayer psalms—These have often been segregated into individual ‘I’ petitions and communal ‘we’ prayers but this is too simplistic as the psalmist may well be speaking as the leader of the community. There are some psalms that oscillate between the singular and the plural. They can be divided into prayers of lament where the psalmist expresses penitence or often protests his innocence in the face of false accusations and severe persecution, and prayers of trust and confidence in God. In the laments there is an appeal to God to listen and this is supported with reasons. Pleas for help can sometimes begin the psalm or occur after the complaint has been made. The prayer may often conclude with a profession of trust and a promise to praise God. Psalm 22 begins as a cry for help but closes with a remarkable act of praise. Examples of the lament include Psalms 3, 5–7, 17, 26, 35, 38, 41, 56–57, 59, 88, 109. The communal element is strong in Psalms 44, 74, 79, 83, 85, 89, 137. Psalms of trust and confidence include 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 91, 121, 125.

Thanksgiving psalms—There are fewer psalms specifically dedicated to giving thanks than those of the prayer type. Many references to thanksgiving or testimony are hidden when the verb ‘give thanks’ is translated ‘praise’ as sometimes happens in English versions. These psalms are characterised by expressions of thanks and gratitude, a description of the trouble from which the psalmist has been delivered, a testimony to others concerning God’s deliverance and an exhortation to join in acknowledging God’s goodness. Psalms of this nature include 18, 30, 34, 92, 116, 118.

Preaching psalms—These can be sub-divided into wisdom, Torah (Law), historical, teaching and exhortation psalms. The wisdom psalms are similar to passages that we find in Proverbs, especially when a contrast is drawn between the righteous and the wicked and the two ways (see Psalms 1, 37, 73, 128). Torah psalms focus on God’s specially revealed Word (see Psalms 1, 19, 119). The historical psalms use the account of Israel’s history to teach and urge the people to change their ways as well as to praise (see Psalms 78, 105–106). Teaching psalms are concerned about the character of true worshippers (Psalms 15, 24,

32). There are teaching elements in many other psalms like 18, 25, 33, 111–112, 147–148. As for the exhortation psalms, these are similar to the kind of preaching we find in prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah (see Psalms 50, 81, 95).

Poetry

Poetry is more musical than prose and both music and poetry can have a much more powerful effect upon the human psyche than a straight piece of narrative. They speak to the heart as well as the mind. Poetry is much easier to sing than prose and judging by the musical references many of the psalms were meant to be sung.

Hebrew poetry is well-adapted to being translated into other languages. Instead of sound, as is often the case in English poetry with its rhyme endings, Hebrew rhythm is conveyed more by sense. Two or sometimes three lines form a unit and present similar or contrasting ideas or a developing theme. This enables the reader or singer to think more about what is being stated instead of moving quickly on as prose narrative tends to encourage.

These units are classified into three main types. Synonymous (or ‘affirming’) parallelism is when the second line uses similar wording to express the sense of the first line. A perfect example of this type is Psalm 6:9, ‘The LORD has heard my supplication;/The LORD will receive my prayer’ (see also Psalm 2). The second line often modifies the thought of the first line in some way. Antithetical (or ‘opposing’) parallelism is when the second line presents a contrast to the first as in Psalm 90:6, ‘In the morning it flourishes and grows up;/In the evening it is cut down and withers’ (see also 37:21). A third type is synthetic (or ‘advancing’) parallelism in which the second line advances or completes the thought of the first line as in Psalm 2:6, ‘Yet I have set my king/ On my holy hill of Zion’. A subset of this third type is climactic (or ascending) parallelism where the first line is held in suspense with the second line providing the completing thought. This ‘step-like’ parallelism is very prominent in the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134) but it is seen in earlier psalms like 29:1, ‘Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones,/Give unto the LORD glory and strength’.

Music

As seems clear from the headings, not all the psalms were intended to be sung so it is somewhat misleading to call the whole collection

'the hymnbook of the second temple', that is to say the psalms sung from the time when the Jews built the temple after their return from Babylonian exile (see Ezra 3-5) to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. For the Jews when Jesus lived on earth, the Book of Psalms was first and foremost viewed as part of Holy Scripture as we have already emphasised. Some of the psalms, like the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134), had special significance at festival times and were sung by the people in their own homes as well as when they made their way to Jerusalem on pilgrimage (see Mark 11:9; 14:26).

The musical accompaniment used in the temple included the lyre, harp, the ten-stringed instrument, trumpets and cymbals (1 Chronicles 16:5,42; 25:6; 2 Chronicles 5:12-13; see Psalm 150 for details). There is no mention of the tambourine (or 'timbrel') or dance forming a part of temple worship. Only on special outdoor occasions do we read of these two expressions of praise being used (Exodus 15:20; Judges 11:34; 1 Samuel 10:5; 2 Samuel 6:5; 1 Chronicles 13:8; Psalms 68:25; 149:3; 150:4).

With the final destruction of the temple by the Romans the choirs and instrumentalists belonging to the Levite families also came to a sudden end. The musical instruments mentioned in Psalms and Chronicles all disappear with only the ram's horn surviving to be used to signal important times in the Jewish calendar. Although much reduced and even banned by some rabbis (understandably in the light of the temple's destruction in AD 70; see Psalm 137:1-4), singing survived and there is some evidence that psalms were sung in the Jewish synagogues to tunes learnt in the temple. Musical instruments, however, were permanently banned from religious worship.

After the New Testament period, there is no record of musical accompaniment when Christians sang their hymns and songs and when references are made to musical instruments, it is only to condemn their use. Two arguments were used. First, the temple instruments were seen as appropriate to the 'childish' era and regarded as part of the Jewish types. Second, musical instruments were associated with sensual pagan practices.

Unaccompanied vocal singing continued to be the norm in communal worship for many centuries and only gradually did an early form of the organ appear in the Western Church from around the 8th century. In the Eastern Orthodox churches it never caught on although

some ancient percussion instruments were introduced at an early point in the Coptic and Ethiopian churches.

The Protestant Reformation re-introduced congregational singing into the communal acts of worship after centuries where the people had become mere spectators rather than participants. Luther encouraged the singing of hymns as well as the biblical psalms and although he objected to the organ probably because of its associations with the Roman Catholic system, he was not totally against the use of musical instruments. Calvin, on the other hand, allowed only unaccompanied singing of the psalms or other scriptural passages in church services. He has an interesting remark on musical instruments in his comment on Psalm 71:22. On the basis of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:13 he argues that while the private use of musical instruments is not forbidden they are now banished from the churches by the plain command of the Holy Spirit 'that we must praise God, and pray to him only in a known tongue'!

When it comes to the communal worship of God, Calvin is right to emphasise that all that is superfluous to worship in spirit and truth should be set aside. His grounds for banning all musical accompaniment however are weak. Musical accompaniment is not even mentioned in the Mosaic law as part of the ceremonial law that has been fulfilled in Christ. If the heavenly singing employed the harp in John's visions (Revelation 5:8; 14:2; 15:2) then such instruments cannot be viewed as 'shadows of a departed dispensation'. The danger is always there, however, for secondary issues like music to become central and to cause needless divisions.

Depending on one's taste all kinds of musical forms can be enjoyed and appreciated. Some tunes, music and instruments can have negative associations but this will vary from person to person and country to country. Hard and fast rules cannot be set down and freedom must be given within the bonds of Christian love (see Romans 14).

Using the Psalms

Many of the individual psalms have been composed out of the psalmist's own personal experiences or as expressions of how the whole company of God's people felt and reacted when they passed through difficult times. It is not always possible to pinpoint the particular situations that led to the compositions but that is no hindrance to appreciating their value. The fact that the final editor(s)

of the Psalter applied these individual psalms to the situations in which the people of God found themselves after the return from the Babylonian exile encourages Christians today to use them in expressing their own concerns and desires. Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the overall purpose of the Psalms which is to lead us to Jesus the Messiah, the Saviour of the world and to view his presence among the people of Zion in the new creation with every enemy defeated and where the sovereign Lord is praised by all.

Personal devotion

The psalms provide the Christian with a devotional handbook of hymns, prayers and exhortations. In all the trials and sorrows of the psalmists we can identify with them and their words can so often speak for us. Such psalms remind us of the personal relationship that God's people can have with the living God and ample examples are given of what Psalm 55:22 encourages us to do, 'Cast your burden on the LORD, and he shall sustain you' (see 1 Peter 5:7). There is boldness in prayer where the psalmist pours out his grief and is not afraid to express his feelings. The flesh and blood enemies that the psalms constantly mention will vary from age to age but they all witness to the fact that we have a spiritual enemy. Ultimately, 'we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 6:12). Paul urges us not to be anxious but in everything by prayer and supplication to make our requests known to God but he adds 'with thanksgiving' (Philippians 4:6) and the prayer psalms often include thanksgiving and praise in addition to psalms specifically dedicated to thanksgiving and praise.

Christians are encouraged to sing hymns and spiritual songs when they are feeling cheerful and also when suffering persecution (Acts 16:25; James 5:13).

Communal worship

Chronicles was written in the post-exilic period and the compiler of that material was eager to encourage his people to trust the God of Israel, to pray earnestly and expectantly, and to sing his praises. It is the Chronicler who records how Hezekiah restored the Temple worship according to the standards set by King David. As the congregation of Israel assembled for worship, Hezekiah commanded the Levites to sing

praise 'with the words of David and of Asaph the seer' (2 Chronicles 29:25-30). As one commentator points out, 'It is a good illustration of the use of Scripture in worship.'³

The New Testament does not advocate exclusive psalmody when singing spiritual songs in church services, but as our prayers should follow the pattern set in God's Word so should our songs. If the singing in heaven includes direct references to the Lamb who was slain for us (Revelation 5:8-14; 15:3), it would be strange if the church on earth was confined to the language of the Old Testament and prevented from singing clearly and directly of Jesus and his atoning death and glorious resurrection as expressed in the language of the New Testament. We live after all in the era of the new covenant and of the giving of the Holy Spirit (John 7:39; 16:24; Acts 2:16-21; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Romans 15:9).