

Psalms

by *L. G. Butler*¹

To many people the Psalms are perhaps the most familiar and beloved of all the books in the Bible. Quotes from the Psalms are used in birthday cards, get well and sympathy cards, inspirational calendars and plaques; they are read at funerals, at bed sides of critically ill persons; and they have inspired multitudes of sermons and songs throughout the ages.

The title, “Psalms” in the English Bible, comes from an anglicized Greek word **Psalmos**, which is used in the Septuagint to translate a Hebrew word meaning “song” or “instrument of music.” Vine defines the word as follows: “**psalmos**...primarily denoted a striking or twitching with the fingers [on musical strings]; then, a sacred song, sung to musical accompaniment, a psalm” (Vine, p. 497). In Rabbinic literature, they are sometimes referred to as “songs of praise” (Bromiley, vol. 3, p. 1030).

Structure of the Book

The book of Psalms is actually a collection of one hundred fifty individual psalms situated almost directly in the middle of the Bible. In marked contrast to other books of the Bible there are no chapters; instead, each Psalm is an individual song.² These songs range in length from two verses (Ps. 17) to 176 verses (Ps. 119), with the most frequent length about eight to ten verses.

In the original Hebrew manuscripts, this long collection of 150 psalms was divided into five sections: Book 1 (1–41); Book 2 (42–72); Book 3 (73–89); Book 4 (90–106); and Book 5 (107–150). Each of these major sections closes with a brief prayer of praise. Many modern translations of the Bible, including the NKJV, retain this five-fold division (Lockyer, p. 885).

Through poetic form the Psalms exemplify Solomon’s observation that “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (Prov. 25:11). Add to the beauty of the language, the depth of content and emotion, and the Psalms can touch us profoundly, deep within.

Our understanding of the Psalms and their potential to “teach and admonish”³ us, can be enhanced by an increased understanding of their origins.

¹ With assistance from Bryan Morrison.

² As such, references should be, for example, “Psalm 22”, not “Psalms chapter 22.”

³ See Col. 3:16.

Authors

The question of who wrote the Psalms may at first appear to be very simple, but a closer look suggests otherwise. Although many people tend to think of David when they think of the Psalms, evidence in the brief descriptions appearing before many of the Psalms attributes them to several different people. These include Moses, David, Asaph, Solomon, the sons of Korah, Heman, and Ethan. About fifty of the Psalms have no author identified at all. The matter is further complicated in that at least some modern critics question whether David even wrote any of them (Bromiley). A discussion of some of the issues related to the authorship follows, along with information about each author.

Moses

Psalm 90, a prayer, is attributed to Moses, whom we know as a prominent leader among the children of Israel around 1500 B.C. While he is best known as the author of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the Scriptures also record: "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD, and spake, saying I will sing unto the LORD..." (Ex. 15:1). The words of the song are recorded in verses 2–19. It is not clear whether Moses composed the song, although the content and words suggest he may have.

David

Seventy-three of the Psalms are attributed to David. However, some critics challenge whether or not he actually was the author of the Psalms that bear his name. Skeptics claim that the Hebrew word (**ladavid**) could be translated "to David," "for David," "about David," or "by David." There is a lot of discussion on this interpretive matter. Some people believe that one who lived the life that David did (i.e., with so much sin) could not possibly have penned the words to the Psalms. Unger summarized reasons supporting the view that David was the author of those attributed to him.

This position, despite the contention of negative criticism, is indicated by the following reasons: (1) David's name is famous in the OT period for music and song and is closely associated with holy liturgy (2 Sam. 6:5–15; 1 Chron. 16:4; 2 Chron. 7:6; 29:30). (2) David was especially endowed by the Holy Spirit (2 Sam. 23:1–2; Mk. 12:36; Acts 2:25–31; 4:25–26). (3) David's music and poetical gifts appear indelibly interwoven on the pages of OT history. He is called "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1). He was a skilled performer on the harp (1 Sam. 16:16–18). He was the author of the masterful elegy written upon the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:19–27). He is referred to as a model poet-musician by the prophet Amos (Amos 6:5). (4) Much internal evidence in the psalms themselves

points to David's authorship. Most of the songs attributed to him reflect some period of his life, such as Ps. 23, 51, and 57. In line with this evidence of Scripture, a number of the psalms indicate Davidic authorship. The common expression **ledavid** is normally construed as indicating Davidic authorship. (5) Certain psalms are cited as Davidic in Scripture in general. Acts 4:25–26 so cites Ps. 2. Acts 2:25–28 so cites Ps. 16; Rom 4:6–8 cites Ps. 32. Acts 1:16–20 thus refers to Ps. 69, as does Rom. 11:9–10 (cf. Acts 1:20 with Ps. 109:6–20; also Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36–37; Luke 20:42–44; Acts 2:34 with Ps. 110:1).⁴

It appears that the personal tragedy⁵ and pain that David experienced, including his human frailty and reliance on God, may have uniquely qualified him to write the Psalms. For a more in-depth discussion of this issue, see "Psalms" in Bromiley, 1979, vol. 3.

Asaph

Twelve of the Psalms are attributed to Asaph (Ps. 50; 73:1–80:19). Although he is not nearly as well known as David, Moses, and Solomon, he held a very important position as one of the "chief musicians" during David's reign. He was a Levite, the son of Berechian, and a descendent of Gershom (1 Chron. 6:39–43).

After David was appointed king, one of the first things he did was bring the Ark of the Covenant to Zion (1 Chron. 16:1–4). "David then appointed certain of the Levites to minister before the ark of the LORD, and to record, and to thank and praise the LORD God of Israel" (1 Chron. 16:4). "Then on that day David delivered first this psalm to thank the LORD into the hand of Asaph and his brethren" (1 Chron. 16:7).

In fact, Asaph's descendants would remain faithful to God for many generations. Several hundred years later, the children of Israel returned from Babylonian exile with the prophets Nehemiah and Ezra to reestablish the worship in Jerusalem. The children of Asaph were involved as the singers, just as their forefathers had done for David. "The singers: the children of Asaph, an hundred twenty and eight" (Ezra 2:41). The following passages also speak of the musical activity of the sons of Asaph during the period of rebuilding:

And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang together by course in praising

⁴ **The New Unger's Bible Dictionary**. Chicago: Moody Press, 1988.

⁵ Including having his father-in-law (1 Sam. 19:8–20) and one of his sons (Absalom) (2 Sam. 15) attempt to kill him.

and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth forever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid (Ezra 3:10–11).

Of the sons of Asaph, the singers were over the business of the house of God. For it was the king's commandment concerning them that a certain portion should be for the singers, due for every day (Neh. 11:22–23; cf. 12:46–47).

Solomon

And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about. And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five (1 Kgs. 4:30–32).

It should not be surprising that at least two psalms (Ps. 72 and Ps. 127) are inscribed by him (although "Ps. 72 may be a prayer for Solomon rather than by him," cf. Bromiley, 1979).

Heman

According to the title, one psalm (88) was written by Heman the Ezrahite. He was one of the three appointed by David to attend to singing in the worship. His family was also directly involved in the singing and worship.

All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer in the words of God, to lift up the horn. And God gave to Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. All these were under the hands of their father for song in the house of the LORD, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of the house of God, according to the king's order to Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman. So the number of them, with their brethren that were instructed in the songs of the LORD, even all that were cunning, was two hundred fourscore and eight (1 Chron. 25:5–7).

Ethan

One psalm (89) is entitled, "a contemplation of Ethan the Ezrahite."⁶ He was one of the singers appointed by David, along with Asaph and Heman. "So

⁶ Ezrahite "may be derived from Zerah, instead of Ezrah, seeing that there were an Ethan and a Heman who were descendants of Zerah, head of a Judahite family (1 Chron. 2:6). There were also an Ethan and a Heman who were Levites (1 Chron. 15:17)" (**International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia**, Electronic Database, BibleSoft, 1996).

the singers, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan, were appointed to sound with cymbals of brass" (1 Chron. 15:19). Hence, he was a contemporary of David.

Sons of Korah

Ten psalms⁷ are ascribed to the sons of Korah. It is not altogether certain whether the original word in the title should be translated "of" or "for" the sons of Korah.⁸ The "sons of Korah" appear to be descendants of the infamous Korah mentioned in Numbers 16. Korah, years before, had led an uprising against Moses and Aaron. When they rebelled, the wrath of God was shown as the earth opened up and swallowed them. Fire rained down from heaven and Korah, along with over 150 priests, were consumed. However, the Scriptures note, "Nevertheless the children of Korah did not die" (Num. 26:11). "Apparently, some of the descendants of Korah survived to become ministers of music in the tabernacle during the time of David" (1 Chron. 6:31–37) (Lockyer, p. 624). One scholar pointed out that the involvement of Korah's descendants in God's work is comforting: people can benefit by learning that even though their parents rebelled against God, the children were not precluded from serving well. The Psalms written by these men attest to the fact that they were involved in valuable service.

Dates

Based on the information about the authors, we are able to date many of the Psalms. Psalm 90 by Moses would have been written around 1500 B.C., while those by David and his contemporaries (Heman, Ethan, and Asaph) would have been written around 1000 B.C. The content of other Psalms can help suggest a date. Psalm 137, for example, appears to have been written during (or shortly after) the Babylonian captivity (cf. vv. 1, 4, 8). While authorities differ regarding dating, the evidence suggests that they were composed over nearly a thousand-year period, with over half being written during David's lifetime. Due to the timeless quality of the Psalms it is probably not that important to spend much time on this issue.

Audience

Many Psalms are addressed directly to God (e.g., Ps. 69, 71, 83, 88, 90), others to the children of Israel (e.g., Ps. 134), and some to all people of all

⁷ Psalms 42, 44–49, 84–85, 87. Note that the title of Psalm 88 reads, "A Psalm of the sons of Korah..." and "A Contemplation of Heman the Ezrahite." Could it be that Heman was one of the "sons of Korah?"

⁸ For a discussion of this issue, see Bromiley, vol. 3, pp. 1032–1033.

nations (e.g., Ps. 117), calling on all creation to praise the Lord (e.g., Ps. 148). But in a larger sense, all of the Psalms are for all people (Ps. 148)—all who hurt, grieve, are anxious, are pondering the meaning of life, are staggering under the weight of sin (Ps. 51), or who long for words to express the deepest feelings and longings of the heart. While initially written and compiled for use in Israel's worship, the Psalms have such enduring quality that in the New Testament, Christians were instructed:

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Eph. 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 (Col. 3:16).

Is any merry? let him sing psalms (Jas. 5:13).

How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, everyone of you hath a psalm... (1 Cor. 14:26).

Even today many songs in our hymnals include psalms or psalm-based songs.

The Authors' Purpose

While it is impossible to know for sure each author's purpose with great certainty, often it is possible to infer the purpose by looking at the various types of psalms. One useful framework identifies six different types of Psalms (Bromiley, vol. 3, pp. 1034–1035):

1. *Psalms of Praise, or Hymn*. Examples include Ps. 8, 29, 33, 104, 111, 113, 148.
2. *Individual Song of Thanksgiving*. Examples include Ps. 30, (34?), 66, 116, 138.
3. *Individual Lament*. Examples include Ps. 6, 13, 31, 39.
4. *Communal Lament*. Examples include Ps. 12, 44, 74, 79.
5. *Royal Psalms*, so named because it is thought that these were used on royal occasions. Examples include Ps. 2, 18, 20, 35, 40, 45.
6. *Wisdom Psalms*. Examples include Ps. 1, 32 (?), 37, 49, 119.

Praise/Worship

It is interesting to note that of the 119 times the word "sing" appears in the Bible, seventy are in the Psalms. The word "praise" appears 158 times in the Psalms alone. The central role of God's majesty and sovereignty is reflected in that the word "LORD" is used 779 times in Psalms alone, an average of 5.193 times per Psalm.⁹ From the first Psalm through the Psalms of ascent¹⁰

⁹ The number of occurrences was determined by a computer search.

(Ps. 120–134), the call to praise rises in crescendo, climaxing as it were in Psalm 148 with a call to all creation to “praise ye the LORD!”

Edification/Instruction

As noted earlier, the Psalms were used for “teaching and admonishing one another” (Col 3:16).

Admonition (Warning)

Admonishing one another with the Psalms (a putting in mind) is required (Col. 3:16) (cf. Vines, p. 13). Psalms 1, 15, 49, and 119 are especially poignant.

Help us find words when words fail us

Often we have feelings we cannot identify and grope for better understanding. Poetry, especially the Psalms, can help. Allow me to offer a personal example. One night I was reading Psalm 102 to my wife, Priscilla, who, at the age of fifty-seven years, had to go into a long-term care facility. She had battled Parkinson’s disease for over twenty years and had been in a care facility for more than three years. Parkinson’s was taking its toll. When I finished reading, she said, “That is how I feel.” On inquiry I learned she referred to verse 24, which reads: “I said, O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days: thy years are throughout all generations.” Persons, especially when younger, who have a life-threatening illness or other major life circumstance, feeling their life being shortened, may find comfort, as my wife did, to know that “a man after God’s own heart”¹¹ had similar feelings. Then, with increased assurance, they may pray: “Please, O Lord, don’t take me away while I am so young.”

Cultural and Social Conditions

Given the long period over which the Psalms were written (a thousand years or more), the cultural and social conditions varied. During Moses’ time, the children of Israel were a nomadic people wandering in the Sinai Peninsula, recently released from slavery in Egypt.

During the days of David, Asaph, Heman, and Ethan, Israel was a developing nation, surrounded by warring tribes who frequently raided their villages, or outright attacked them. It is no wonder that David spoke so much about his enemies and his reliance on God in such troubled times. To get a feel

¹⁰ Thought to be Psalms the people sang as they ascended the hill to worship in Jerusalem, known as “Songs of Degrees” in the KJV.

¹¹ That is, the psalmist David, Acts 13:22.

for the times, read about a small village, Keilah, situated about eighteen miles southwest of Jerusalem, recorded in 1 Samuel 23:1–6. Try to envision yourself living there as you read the description. Even though the town had gates and bars (v. 7), they would wake up to find their grain—on which they depended for food—had been robbed from the threshing floor (v. 1). Again, read of David seeking refuge in a cave (1 Sam. 22:1). Then read Psalm 142 to gain insight into his feelings. People living today with bars on their windows and awaking (or coming home) to find their property vandalized or stolen, or go to bed not knowing whether they may be raped or killed before morning, perhaps share feelings similar to those expressed by David.

During Solomon’s time (Ps. 72, 147), there appeared to be mostly great prosperity, exultation with the magnificent new temple, and peace with the surrounding nations. Later, during the exile (Ps. 137), the children of Israel who survived the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem found themselves in a foreign land with broken hearts as they remembered their devastated homeland and the cruelty exhibited to their slain relatives. Some authorities feel that some of the Psalms were written after the exile during the period of rebuilding.

Major Prophecies and Their Fulfillment in New Testament¹²

Many prophecies of the coming of Jesus appear in the Psalms. Consider the following chart for a list of some of these prophecies. It appears noteworthy that when man’s weakness and needs are laid bare in the Psalms, Messianic hope is given through these prophecies.

Prophecy	Psalms	New Testament
Thou art my Son	2:7	Acts 13:33
Made a little lower than the angels	8:5	Heb. 2:6–10
Not leave soul in hell	16:10	Acts 2:27; 13:35–37
Trusted in the Lord	22:8	Mt.27: 42–43
Delight to do thy will	40:7–8	Heb. 10:7
Familiar friend lift up his heel against	41:9	Jn. 13:18
Throne last forever	45:6	Heb. 1:8
Zeal of thine house consumed me	69:9	Jn. 2:14, 17
After order of Melchizedek	110:4	Heb. 7:17
Stone which the builders rejected	118:22	Mt. 21:42
Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord	118:26	Mt. 21:9

¹² See Alexander and Alexander, 1973, pp., 329.

Summary and Conclusion

In many ways, the shortest psalm (117) appears to capture the essence of the whole collection:

O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people. For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the LORD endureth forever. Praise ye the LORD (vv. 1–2).

It begins and ends with the admonition to “praise the LORD,” as does the whole book of Psalms. The middle of this psalm, like the collection as a whole from Psalms 1–150, helps us (all nations, all peoples of all time) more honestly face (and own) our deepest fears, needs, and failures in light of God’s truth, tempered by His great mercy. Then, as we begin and close each day, and ultimately our life, may we sing forth from the bottom of our hearts: “Praise ye the LORD!” “Praise ye the LORD!” *4503 53rd St., Lubbock, TX 79414*

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