

“Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law.”
Psalms 119:18

LESSON ONE – Introduction

Title of the Book

(1) The English words “psalms” and “psalter” are drawn directly from the Latin (*psalmi* and *psalterium*) which came from similar terms in Greek.

“In Greek *psalmos* denotes the music of a stringed instrument, or a song which is sung to the accompaniment of such music. *Psalterion* originally referred to a stringed instrument, but later it came to mean also a ‘collection of songs’ ... [or] ‘a (religious) song accompanied by stringed instruments’ which occurs some 57 times in the titles of the Psalms. Thus the Greek translators must have taken the translation of the most common Hebrew term for a particular kind of song, using it as a title for the whole collection.” [A.A. Anderson, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Psalms*, Wm B Eerdmans, 1981, p.23]

(2) The title in Hebrew is “**book of praises**” or simply “praises.” It comes from the same Hebrew root as does **hallelujah** – which means *praise the LORD [Yahweh]*.

“...the Hebrew title defines the contents of the book, or at least an important part of it, as praises from God ... whereas the Greek and English titles define the form of the book as hymns sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments.” [R. H. Pfeiffer, in A.A. Anderson, p. 23]

Location of the Psalms

(1) In the English Bible, the Psalms are found “right in the middle.” They are categorized with the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Solomon, and Lamentations as the **poetical books** of the OT.

(2) Whereas the English OT follows the Greek and Latin arrangement of books (which is more topical and chronological), the Hebrew Bible is divided into three broad divisions: *the Law, the Prophets, and, the Writings*. The Psalter is found first in the Writings section – and is even used by Jesus at one point to represent that whole section (see [Luke 24:44](#)).

Organization of the Psalms

(1) The book of Psalms is actually comprised of 5 sections which it calls “books” designated by Roman numerals. these books each end with a “doxology” passage.

Book I	<i>Psalms 1–41</i>
Book II	<i>Psalms 42–72</i>
Book III	<i>Psalms 73–89</i>
Book IV	<i>Psalms 90–106</i>
Book V	<i>Psalms 107–150</i>

(2) These books probably circulated as independent compilations prior to forming the whole Psalter. Each has its own traits and distinctives (such as the preferred term for God), but some of the contents in one book are 'duplicated' in another (ie: Pss. 14 & 53; Pss. 40 & 70). Perhaps the five books mirror the Pentateuch?

(3) Books IV and V of the Psalms contain smaller clusters of psalms, grouped by their subjects or uses, such as Pss. 113–118 (the "Egyptian Hallel" used at Passover), or Pss. 120–134 (the "Psalms of Assent," part of the "Great Hallel"), or Pss. 146–150 (a final Hallel, where all the psalms end with *hallelujah*).

(4) Psalm 1 appears; as an introduction or preface to the whole Psalter, since, unlike most of the psalms of Book I, it does not have a title or author statement.

(5) The **LXX** (the Greek **Septuagint** – abbreviated by the Roman numeral seventy) contains a Psalm 151 purportedly about David and Goliath, but labels it as "outside the number [the traditional 150]."

"It may be fair to say that the Psalter, taken on its own terms, is not so much a liturgical library ... as a hospitable house, well lived-in, where most things can be found and borrowed after some searching, and whose first occupants have left on it everywhere the imprint of their experiences and the stamp of their characters." [Kidner, page 18]

Authorship & Name References

(1) **DAVID**. Seventy-three psalms (nearly half the Psalter) have the notation "(belonging) to David" in the opening text. The LXX has 14 other psalms ascribed this way to him. It is possible that some of these are written "on behalf of David." He was known as "*the sweet psalmist of Israel*" (see 2 Samuel 23:1). Many psalms have historical references to his life (see below).

(2) **THE SONS OF KORAH**. There are twelve psalms ascribed to this Levitical family: Pss. 42–49, 84–85, 87, and 88. These men were the "spared descendants" of a man who died for his rebellion (see Numbers 26).

*"One part of this family became the temple doorkeepers and guardians, another part of the singers and musicians of the temple choir founded under David by Heman, whose fellow-Levites **Asaph** and **Jeduthun** (or **Ethan**) directed the choirs drawn from the other two clans of that tribe."* [Kidner, page 35]

(3) **ASAPH**. Twelve psalms have the name of Asaph in their introduction: Pss. 50, and 73–83. Asaph was a Levite, and one of the choir directors in the days of King David.

(4) **SOLOMON**. Psalms 72 and 127 are attributed to Solomon.

(5) **HEMAN THE EZRAHITE**. Psalm 88 is ascribed to him. Heman was a Levite and founder of a choir and linked to the sons of Korah. "*According to 1 Kings 4:31 Heman was one of the famous sages of Solomon's time.*" [Anderson, page 46].

(6) **ETHAN THE EZRAHITE (JEDUTHUN?)**. Psalm 89 is ascribed to Ethan, who is probably identical with Jeduthun (cf: Pss. 39, 62, 77), founder of a choir and one of David's chief musicians.

(7) **MOSES**. Psalm 90 is connected to Moses, yet few commentators accept his direct authorship of it.

Types/Genres of Psalms

(1) In his video series, *DUST TO GLORY*, Dr. R. C. Sproul says "*if you want to know how to pray, read the Psalms,*" which he calls "**150 prayers**" displaying the *A.C.T.S.* components of prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication).

(2) **Common genre classifications of psalms** [adapted from LaSor, Hubbard & Bush *Old Testament Introduction*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982, pp. 514+ff]:

- a. **Hymns of praise** — often with a call to worship, a description of God's acts or attributes, and a concluding call to fresh praise.
- b. **Complaints of the people** — (i.e., Pss. 12, 44, 58, 60, etc.), prayerful songs of God's people during times of stress, emergency, threat or oppression. [see next category for further details]
- c. **Complaints of the individual** — (i.e., Pss. 3, 5-7, 13, 17, 22, 25-28, etc.). **More psalms fall into this category than any other (according to LaSor, Hubbard & Bush). Features of such psalms:
 - an address or cry to God (e.g., Psalm 22:1)
 - a complaint, usually expressed in poetic figures (22:12)
 - a confession of trust (22:4)
 - a prayer of confession of sin (Ps. 51:3-5), or, a protest of innocence (Ps. 26:3-8)
 - an additional argument or appeal to God (22:9)
 - a vow of praise or thanksgiving or testimony (22:22)
 - an expression of confidence/assurance in God (22:24)
- d. **Thanksgiving Songs of the individual** — (i.e., Pss. 23, 30, 32... 107, 116, etc.), for use when deliverance had come, or a complaint had been answered. These feature:
 - a proclamation of love and praise to God (e.g., Psalm 30:1)
 - a report of the rescue (30:2-3)
 - an expression of thanks and praise (30:4)
 - a recollection of the need (30:8-10)
 - a renewal of the vow of praise (30:11-12)
- e. **Royal Psalms** — (i.e., Pss. 2, 45, 72, 101, 110, etc.), which refer to the king of Israel, and often, to the Messianic King, Jesus.
- f. **Wisdom Psalms** — (i.e., Pss. 1, 32, 37, 49, 73, 127, 128, 133, etc.), which contain instruction for right living and portray the consequences of righteousness (or wickedness).
- g. **Imprecatory Psalms** — (i.e., Pss. 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137 and 139), contain curses or prayers for God's judgment on, or the punishment of, the psalmist's enemies. To **imprecate** means *to invoke evil upon, or curse*. **A separate lecture will cover this category.

Closing thought:

*In the 150 psalms the Holy Spirit has given us more than a book of Israel's prayer and praise. The Book of Psalms is a cross section of God's revelation to Israel and of Israel's response in faith to the Lord. The Psalms mirror the faith of Israel. In them we receive windows that enable us to look out on our brothers and sisters in the faith of more than twenty-five hundred years ago. The Psalms invite us to experience how God's people in the past related to Him. The Psalms witness to the glory of Zion, to the Davidic covenant, to the fidelity of God, to the Exodus and Conquest traditions, to God the Creator-Redeemer-King, and to Yahweh as the Divine Warrior. We see an interplay of many different motifs and emphases, which, when isolated, help us to understand better the OT as a whole and its bearing on the NT. **The Book of Psalms is God's prescription for a complacent church**, because through it he reveals how great, wonderful, magnificent, wise and utterly awe-inspiring He is! If God's people before the Incarnation could have such a faith in the Lord, witnessing to His greatness and readiness to help, how much more should this be true among twentieth-century [and 21st century] Christians! The Book of Psalms can revolutionize our devotional life, our family patterns, and the fellowship and the witness of the church of Jesus Christ.*

[Willem VanGemeren, E.B.C., page 5].