

Psalms Session 1 What Are the Psalms?

The Book of Psalms appears in the Hebrew Bible as the first book in the third section, known as the Writings. In the Christian Old Testament, it stands in the middle, just after Job. Unlike many books of the Bible, Psalms is often lifted out of its context and produced as a separate volume, a Psalter, for personal or devotional use. Despite the seemingly firm nature of the book, however, Psalms is one of the least stable corpora in the entire Bible.

Modern Bibles generally contain 150 psalms, based on the form found in the traditional Jewish (the Masoretic) text. But the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from approximately the third century B.C.E., contains 151 psalms; in addition, the Hebrew Psalms 9–10 and 114–115 are each combined in the Greek into single psalms, while the Hebrew Psalms 113 and 116 are divided in two in the Greek. The Syriac text of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Peshitta, contains 155 psalms, as does the Psalms scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls—though they are not the same 155. All of this evidence points to the conclusion that in the late biblical period, and even for a time beyond, the book of Psalms had not achieved a fixed form.

This lack of fixity is evident not only in the number of psalms, but in their order. The book of Psalms is divided in the Hebrew into five volumes: Psalms 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; and 107–50. Across all versions of the book, the first three of these volumes or so are relatively stable. It is in the last two volumes that we see significant fluidity (as can be seen in the divisions and recombinations evident in the Greek, noted above). In the Dead Sea Scrolls in particular, the last third or so of the book of Psalms is presented in a very different order from what we are accustomed to.

There are a number of further internal divisions or units within the book of Psalms. We find clusters of psalms that are known as the Psalms of Asaph, or the Psalms of Ascent; there is a segment, in Psalms 42–83, which is known as the “Elohistic Psalter,” because it appears that in these psalms the divine name Yahweh has been systematically replaced with the generic title Elohim, “God.” These internal divisions suggest that the book of Psalms should be understood as a second-level collection: a gathering together of previously independent collections of psalms. In this light, the fluidity we see in the textual tradition should not be particularly surprising: since Psalms was a gathering place for certain types of Hebrew poetry, it was possible to add to the collection in line with the traditions of various communities. It is not always clear whether the additional psalms we find in the Greek, Syriac, and Dead Sea Scrolls were new compositions that were added to the collection, or were rather older pieces that had simply not made the initial cut in the Hebrew text. Regardless, we should certainly understand the book of Psalms as something of a rolling corpus, one that was not considered to be closed until quite late in the process of the transmission of the biblical text.

Tradition holds that David was the author of the book of Psalms. In the story of David’s life, he is known to have been a musician: in 1 Samuel 16, he famously plays the lyre to soothe Saul’s troubled spirit. Later in David’s life, after the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, he laments their fate by reciting the poem found in 2 Samuel 22—a poem that is virtually identical to what we have in Psalm 18. It was perhaps these traditions that led to the view that David was in fact the author of many psalms, if not of the entire Psalter: 73 psalms in the Hebrew are attributed to David with the superscription *le-David*. There are good reasons to doubt the authenticity of these ascriptions, however. In the first place, some of the psalms that are ascribed to David could not have been spoken by him for historical reasons: they mention the Temple, which was not built in

David's time but in that of his son, Solomon, or, even more egregiously, they are clearly set in the context of the Babylonian exile—here Psalm 137, “By the waters of Babylon we lay down and wept for thee, O Zion,” is a clear example. Furthermore, the same process of textual fluidity that we see with the scope of the book of Psalms as a whole is evident also in these superscriptions: while the Hebrew text ascribes 73 psalms to David, the Greek version ascribes 85 to him. In other words, the process of connecting David to the Psalms seems to have been an ongoing one, rather than an element of the original poems themselves.

Some of the references to David in the Psalms are quite specific, attributing them not just to David but to David at a particular point in his life: Psalm 3, for instance is said to be a psalm of David when he fled from Absalom. It is generally understood that these specific references are a later development: those responsible for preserving the biblical oral tradition and scribes searched for viable situations in David's life for which a given psalm might have been an appropriate thing to say. It should be noted, however, that even those psalms with specific Davidic superscriptions do not actually contain any specific references to David or his life in the poems themselves.

Nevertheless, the tradition that David was responsible for the Psalms, or closely connected to them at least, was a strong one. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is claimed that David composed 3,600 psalms. In both the scrolls and in the New Testament, the word “David” is used to refer to the book of Psalms (as in “the law, the prophets, and David”). Similarly, the ancient rabbis declared that David was the author of the Psalms. At the same time, however, there are many psalms that are ascribed to a different figure: Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, the sons of Korah—even Solomon and Moses. Again, we can see that the idea that David wrote the Psalms was one that developed over time, perhaps in direct relation to the tradition that, although he

didn't actually build the Temple himself, he did set up all the aspects of its rituals and service, as Chronicles is at great pains to describe.

Given the traditional ascription to David, the question of the date of the Psalms comes into play. For the most part, it is generally acknowledged that most psalms are difficult, if not in fact impossible, to date. Some are reasonably clear—we can point again to Psalm 137, which obviously comes out of an exilic context. In some cases, we can see in a psalm an idea or a set of ideas that seem not to fit with later biblical or Jewish concepts: for example, the ostensible polytheism evident in Psalm 82, where Yahweh stands in the divine council of El, the chief deity of the Canaanites. Most scholars agree that those psalms that refer to the Torah, or to wisdom traditions more broadly, are relatively late. Most psalms, however, do not contain such clear indications as to their time or place of origin. Thus it is not impossible that David, or a contemporary, could have written some of the psalms; but it is at the same time impossible to prove this to be the case.

Perhaps the most important breakthrough in the study of the Psalms came in the work of Hermann Gunkel, a German scholar from the early twentieth century. Gunkel's insight was that the Psalms could be broken down into various categories according to their formal features and content. Thus Gunkel identified a number of types of psalms: psalms of lament, both individual and communal, psalms of thanksgiving, royal psalms, psalms of divine enthronement, wisdom psalms, hymns, etc. Gunkel attempted to understand the contexts in which these types, or forms, of psalms could have come into being in the ancient Israelite community. He was interested not in the question of the composition of any given psalm, but rather in what he called the *Sitz im Leben*, the "setting in life," of each broader category. When, for instance, would a psalm of thanksgiving have been used in ancient Israel?

For the most part, Gunkel concluded that almost every type of psalm had its origin in the Israelite cultic sphere: these were, in other words, to be understood as liturgical texts, recited at the sanctuary on various occasions. For example, one could imagine that a psalm of thanksgiving would be recited when an individual would go to the sanctuary to make a thanksgiving offering. If one was experiencing some sort of personal crisis, one would offer a sacrifice to the deity, as a means of getting God's attention, and then recite a psalm of individual lament, asking for divine favor and rescue.

This cultic setting makes eminent sense—and comports very well with the notion from Chronicles that David instituted the reading of psalms as part of setting up the service at the Temple in Jerusalem. Scholarship has almost universally accepted the liturgical function of the psalms. Part of what makes Gunkel's insight so appealing is that it accounts for the seemingly repetitive nature of the psalms within each category: when one reads all of the psalms of thanksgiving, they appear to be functionally indistinguishable. By placing them within a cultic context, it is possible then to imagine that when an individual went to the sanctuary to make an offering, the officiating priest would provide him with a liturgical text to accompany the sacrifice, whichever text seemed most appropriate to the offeror's situation.

This idea also provides us with some insight into the interdependence of prayer, in the form of the psalms, and the cultic ritual of sacrifice. In ancient Israel, access to the deity was always mediated through sacrifice: there was no direct means of communication with heaven (the stories of the patriarchs and Moses notwithstanding). Instead, we should imagine something more like what we find in the story of Hannah, Samuel's mother, at the beginning of 1 Samuel. Hannah is famous in part for her magnificent prayer, found in 1 Samuel 2. This prayer is really nothing other than a psalm of thanksgiving: it begins by saying "I have triumphed over my

enemies,” and then continues to praise God’s awesome power in the world. There is, however, virtually nothing in the body of the poem that is specific to Hannah’s situation—with the exception of the reference to God making the barren woman fruitful, and even this is but one of many descriptions of God’s capacity to overturn the way of the world in favor of the weak. And it should be noted that Hannah does not simply go straight to the sanctuary to pray; she is there because she and her family have just been offering their annual sacrifices. In this we can see the sort of liturgical function that Gunkel imagined for the psalms, along with the notion that the psalms were more stereotyped than individualized.

The final shape of the book of Psalms seems to have been determined by the setting of Psalm 1, a wisdom psalm, and by the concluding psalms, all of which are hymns praising God. In theory, this was intended to suggest that the Psalms were a type of Torah—that is, a collection to be read and studied and meditated upon as a whole. It is safe to say that this attempt to give a wisdom coloring to the book of Psalms was, however, a failure. The power of the psalms, the reason that they have been so well-loved for so long, and in so many diverse communities, is precisely because they speak to the emotional aspect of the individual reader. It should be noted that the Psalms are emphatically human in their origin: they do not represent divine speech or revelation. They are expressions of individual experiences and emotions, directed to the deity. As such, they achieve a certain sort of universality: even if a given psalm may not feel appropriate to one’s situation, it is almost certain that another will. And just as life contains constant vicissitudes from happiness to sadness, from success to failure, and back again, so too the psalms contain the wide range of expressions of those highs and lows. The Psalms are a record of how ancient Israel, and individual ancient Israelites, reckoned with their lives in light of their

understanding of their relationship with God. This use shines through to the present, and gives the Psalms the lasting power they still have today.

Questions for Discussion:

How does the shape of the book of Psalms influence how we approach and read it?

Does the cultic use of the Psalms in Israel's history have any relationship to our own prayer practices?

Does David's authorship of the Psalms make any difference to how we perceive them?