

# INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Title--Hebrew title *tehillim* means "praise" (same root as "hallelujah")--*psalm* is a transliteration of Greek *psalmoi*, itself a translation of Hebrew *mizmor*--verb form of which indicates singing or the musical accompaniment of singing

Format--Collections of individual psalms, some used individually, others in community; some as liturgy, some in processions and rituals--ultimately became Hebrew hymnbook, also functioning as instruction book, prayer book--timelessness arises from their messages but also their lack of precise historic detail

Date--some seem pre-exilic (586 BCE) but none datable to 10th century BCE, approximate time of David; some clearly are exilic or post-exilic, and some appear to have been edited or re-worked in post-exilic years

Author--although frequently attributed to David, modern scholars deem very few (if any) to show his direct authorship: "Early extra-biblical sources show that ancient Jewish and Christian tradition ... assumed that David wrote all or most of Psalms... [First century Christian writings] suggest that there was widespread acceptance of the Davidic authorship of the entire Psalter, a tradition that is echoed in rabbinic literature and has continued until modern times in both Jewish and Christian circles. Davidic authorship, however, on the basis of linguistic and contextual evidence, is not accepted as historical fact by modern scholars, but is viewed as a way the ancients linked biblical writings with the appropriate inspired well-known biblical figures, thereby confirming the divine inspiration and the authority of those writings."

Adele Berlin & Marc Zvi Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*

## ORGANIZATION

### 5 Books

- Book I--Psalm 1-41
- Book II--Psalm 42-72
- Book III--Psalm 73-89
- Book IV--Psalm 90-106
- Book V--Psalm 107-150

### Fundamental ideas

- Praise/Prayer/Instruction
- God to human/human to God
- Thanksgiving & happiness/affliction & plea
- Individual/Community
- Davidic king/messiah

### Basic types (from James L. Mays, *Interpretation*)

- Prayer for help for an individual
- Thanksgiving song of an individual
- Corporate prayer for help
- Hymn of praise/thanks
- Royal psalm
- Psalm of instruction (wisdom)
- Mixed (procession, ascent, victory, inauguration, etc.)

## TECHNIQUES

### Elements of Hebrew poetry

Parallelism

Synonymous

Antithetic

Mixed

Repetition, refrain

Acrostics--each line beginning with a letter of Hebrew alphabet

Ambiguity, terseness, word play, layered meaning

Figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, imagery, personification, etc.

Rhetorical devices such as questions, metonymy, anaphora, inclusio, chiasm, etc.

### Approaches for study

Canonical--studies the Psalms in literary context--the context of neighboring psalms, a smaller collection, the entire collection ("the Psalter"), or contemporary literature.

Form--classifies psalms by genre, then attempts to determine where each type would have fit into the worship of ancient Israel or Judah.

Rhetorical--attends to literary features so as to appreciate each psalm as a unique poetic creation and to consider author's intent and the psalm's effect.

Historical-Critical--takes into account that the biblical texts were written long ago, in a cultural matrix very different from our own; and attempts to understand the texts first of all in the context of that ancient setting.

"To interpret the psalms both as human words to God and as God's word to humans means that a multiplicity of methods is necessary. To appreciate the psalms as humanity's response to God--as sacred poetry as well as songs and prayers used in worship--it is necessary to employ form criticism and rhetorical criticism. To be sure, these methods may yield insights that lead to fruitful theological reflection; however, ... to appreciate the psalms more fully as God's word to humanity--as Scripture--it is helpful to consider the canonical shape of the psalter itself. Thus [this] commentary consciously employs a multiplicity of methods in an attempt to interpret the psalms both historically and theologically."

J. Clinton McMann *NIB*

## THEOLOGY

"[The Psalms] illustrate the theology and worship of the Israelites across the six centuries in which they were composed and collected. No other book in the Bible has this kind of origin and interpretation. One learns what kind of God Israel worshipped, and both the history and the mystery of the covenanted relationship. At the same time, one learns much about the warmth and dynamism of Israel's faith. An important mix of theology and anthropology is the result....The familiarity and frankness of the lament, the enthusiasm of the hymn, the confessional character of the thanksgiving--all these speak to the human heart before God."

Roland E. Murphy, *OCB*