

Introduction to the Psalms

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I have decided to divide these twenty four lectures into three parts. In the first four and five lectures I will introduce you to the psalms as a whole. In this material of introduction I will take up the external form of the psalms, the title of the psalms, the superscriptions, some of the technical wording and so forth, but perhaps one of the most important things I will take up in the introduction is the various ways people have interpreted the psalms. There are definite approaches or methods for exegeting and interpreting the psalms. In any case, having spent four or five lectures on an introduction to the Psalms, treating them as a whole, in the next ten lectures I will now look at the psalms in some depth.

Now the psalms can be studied in various ways. It will be recognized that the psalms fall into various categories. You can group the psalms according to their types, for example; some psalms are petition psalms, some psalms are acknowledgment and others are psalms of praise. And it's very instructive to learn that these psalms that fall into distinct types have distinct motifs. They have similar outlines, similar vocabularies, similar terminology and imagery. And if we can understand the various types of psalms and the forms of the psalms, then you will be able to analyze and dissect and dig out the meat on your own in all the psalms that fall into those particular types. It is also true that not all the psalms fall into given forms. They are not all lament psalms, nor are they all thanksgiving or acknowledgment, nor are they all praise psalms.

Psalms can also be classified and grouped together according to their subject matter. For example, some psalms have as their subject matter the King of Israel. And other psalms have as their subject matter the enthronement of Yahweh upon the earth. Still other psalms are not grouped together necessarily by their form nor by their content but by their common setting in life, how they were used in the temple and we will so group the psalms. For

example, the psalms belonging to the ascent, to the pilgrimages to Jerusalem that the Israelites would make three times per year and in particular at the Feast of Tabernacle or Sukkôt in the fall. So therefore I will group the psalms in these ten lectures according to their form, according to their content and according to their common setting. In the last ten lectures I will share with you in sermon form, five psalms. Here I will seek to show you by example how you can take the psalms and apply them to life, to the twentieth century church, and to contemporary man, for indeed the psalms give ancient answers to modern problems.

Now with that introduction, let us look at the introductory material to the psalms and in this particular lecture I want to take up three subject matters. First of all, I will take up the titles of the psalms. Secondly, I will take up the organization of the psalms, and thirdly, I will take up the history of the formation of the Psalter.

First of all, then, let us look at the title of the psalms. We should really divide this discussion regarding the title of the psalms into two parts. First of all, we should recognize the Hebrew title and then we should know something about the English titles for the Book of Psalms. The Hebrew title to this collection of hymns, for that's what the psalms are – it is an anthology, it is a collection of hymns, meant for the worship of Israel in the temple; most of them written for the first temple but also used in the second temple built under the aegis of Zerubbabel and the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. The Hebrew title for this hymn book is Tehillim. Now that noun goes back to the verbal root hlll and you know the word hallel from such words as hallelujah. The word hallelujah means praise Yah. The last ending is a shortened form for God's personal name. In all probability God's personal name is Yahweh, sometimes referred to as Yah. That's why you have such names as Elijah, that is, Yah is my God, or Adonijah, my Lord is Yah – hallelujah. Now the hallelu means praise and the form tehillim means praises. So the Hebrews entitled the book the Tehillim, the praises, the praises of Israel. It is the Book of Praise. And for my part I feel if you could give one title to the entire collection this is the most appropriate title.

Claus Westermann in his book, *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, John Knox Press, 1965, page 74, notes that in every psalm one finds a note of praise. Here's what he concludes. In the investigation of all the individual lament psalms of the Old Testament I found, to my astonishment, that there are no psalms which do not progress

beyond petition and lament. In the background of Westermann's statement is the understanding that most psalms are lament psalms or petition psalms. That is, the psalmist finds himself in desperate straits. Maybe he feels like David did when he is fleeing from Saul and he was like the flea on the back of a dog and his situation was desperate and there was no hope of salvation. In his desperate situation he cries out to God to save him, he pours out his lament and he petitions God. Now the great bulk of the psalms fall into that category and that's why Westermann says, it was to his astonishment, that though most of the psalms were lament psalms, there was not one that did not progress beyond petition and lament to the note of praise. I would have to modify Westermann's statement just in a minor point and that is, I have found that in Psalm 88 the psalmist does not progress beyond petition and lament. It is the only psalm to my knowledge in the entire collection that does not have a note of praise or an anticipation of praise. But with that exception every psalm has praise within it. And so we conclude that the Hebrew title is indeed a happy choice. It is the name *tehillim*, The Book of Praise.

Now in the English books we find that there are three titles applied to the psalms. Sometimes it is called The Psalter, sometimes it is called The Psalms and other times, though it may seem picayune, it is called The Book of Psalms. Now why is it in our English Bibles we find three different titles to this collection of hymns? Well the reason for this is that in the Greek and Latin translations these various titles were applied to this book. The Old Testament was translated into Greek at about 250–150 B.C. But we really do not have any copies of that Greek translation until about 350 A.D. Here we pick up the Codex Vaticanus, the oldest extant copy of the Old Testament in Greek. In this particular Codex, the Book of Psalms is entitled *psalmos* and from that title that was applied to the Psalm in the Greek translation we derive the English title, Psalms. Another Codex of the Greek translation a little bit later from about 400 A.D. is the Codex Alexandrinus. Now in this collection there is another title applied to the Psalms; it is called The Psalterion. Now this essentially means the same thing but from the title Psalterion we get the name Psalter. When Jerome translated the Book of Psalms into Latin, he translated it, he gave the title rather, *Liber Psalmorum* which gives us our name, The Book of Psalms.

Now all three of these titles go basically back to the Greek root *Psalmos* which is a translation of a word in the superscription of the psalms. Many of the psalms have as a technical term in their

superscription the word *mizmôr* in Hebrew. *mi z m o r*. This word in Hebrew, *mizmôr*, means that you are to sing this song to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument and that is what the Greek word *psalmos*, *psalmoi* means and that's what essentially, technically, the word *psalm* means; it means you are to sing this song to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. But it is interesting to note that in the evolution of the English language and in the development of the meaning of this word, *psalms*, it loses that technical sense of singing a song to the accompaniment of stringed instruments, but now it comes over in the English language to mean praise. In other words the inherent quality of this *psalm* has changed the meaning of our English word into meaning praise. I think Barth says the point very well. This is by Christoph F. Barth, in his book, *Introduction to the Psalms*, Scribner's, 1966 and page 1. "Under the influence of the Greek Bible and of the advance of Christianity, however, it (referring to *psalmos*) came to have the meaning 'song of praise' and the idea that such songs of praise might have been accompanied on stringed instruments fell into the background or was completely forgotten." Now having said a word about the title of the *Psalms* let us take a look at the organization of the *Psalter*.

I'm sure most of you who are listening to these lectures are aware that really we are dealing with five books. We end up with one total book which we call the *Psalms*, but really within this one book there are five books. These books; book 1, the first book is found in *Psalms* 1-41. The second book is *Psalms* 42-72. The third book, *Psalms* 73-89, the fourth book, *Psalms* 90-106 and the fifth book *Psalms* 107-150. Each of these first four books concludes with a doxology while *Psalm* 150 occupies the place of the doxology and forms an appropriate finale to the entire collection. We may just take a look at these doxologies that end each one of these. Let us look first of all at *Psalm* 41 and verse 13. Here it ends in the traditional doxology found at the end of each of these first four books. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and amen." We call the first part where it says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel" the *berachah* because the Hebrew word *berachah* means blessing. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting." And then we read "Amen and amen." Now if we were to compare this with *I Chronicles* 16:31 where it is more fully expressed I think we would see that it was the priest who pronounced the *berachah* and it was the people who responded "amen and amen." For example, looking at *I Chronicles* 16 and verse, instead of 31, I mispoke myself. I should have said verse 36, we read, "Blessed be the Lord God of

Israel for ever and ever” and then we read, “And all the people said amen and praise the Lord.” So it appears here that it is the priest who said, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting” and then the people would say, “Amen and amen.” We may take a look again at the end of the second book, that is Psalms 72 and the last verse, well next to the last verse really because we have another editorial comment at the end of that particular psalm. Psalm 72 and verse 19, “Blessed be his glorious name forever. And let the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and amen.” Again if we look at the end of Psalm 89, ending the third book, “Blessed be the Lord forevermore. Amen and amen.” And then at the end of Psalm 106 it is said explicitly again that all the people said amen. We read in verse 48 of Psalm 106, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting. And let all the people say amen, praise ye the Lord.” Then we find that in Psalm 150 we have a total doxology that concludes the fifth book and is really the fitting finale to the entire collection.

Now we might raise the question just how old is this collection into five books and we can say quite authoritatively here that at least it goes back into the pre Christian era. For example the oldest explicit testimony to the five fold partition of the Psalter occurs in a poorly preserved liturgical fragment from Qumran called IQ Psalm 30 which dates to the turn of the Christian era and we know its even earlier than that because the same five fold division is also found in the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation which was made between 200 and 100 B.C. So that we can say that it is at least that old.

Now we might discuss while we are considering the organization of The Psalter into five books, why is it divided in this fashion? Here, if you study the literature, read the literature, you will find that there are traditionally two explanations for this five book arrangement. The traditional Jewish explanation is that this arrangement is a conscious echo of the Pentateuch. That is, even as the first books of Moses are divided into five which we call the Pentateuch, so likewise this is to mirror the structure of the Pentateuch and likewise divided into five books. The Midrash from the Talmudic period on Psalm 1 states this “As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel.” I’m quoting here from William G. Braude The Midrash on the Psalms, New Haven, 1959, Vol. 1, page 5. Now while many agree that it is an artificial structure to mirror the Pentateuch, no commentator today in my judgment has satisfactorily pointed out any striking correspondences between these five books

respectively. If you wish to see an attempt at showing these mirroring pattern, how these five books mirror the Pentateuch, you might read Ironside's commentary on The Psalms. And I'm only saying that for my part I find it very unconvincing. I think the best discussion on this patterning is found in N. A. Smith's work, Hymn of The Temple, 1951, pages 18 21.

A second explanation is not that it is a conscious echoing of the Pentateuch of Moses but rather that it is the result of the chronological collecting of the works. This is the viewpoint of Leopold, namely that it is the product of a gradual process of accretion as book was added to book in chronological sequence until the whole was complete. I for my part find this more satisfying and I think we'll find some evidence for this in the discussion of the Yahwistic and Elohist psalters. That is the second explanation then is that there was a gradual bringing together the psalms into these collections. First one collection, then a second collection, then a third and a fourth and finally a fifth collection and hence it reflects chronological bringing together of the psalms into various books.

A third thing I'd like to discuss under this discussion of the organization of the Psalter is the realization that the first two books are sometimes called the Yahwistic and the Elohist psalters respectively. That is, book one is referred to as the Yahwistic psalter and book two is referred to as the Elohist psalter. Now there are two reasons for this designation. The first reason for this designation is that there is a statistical preference for the name for God, Yahweh. In the first book of the Psalter, books 1-41, and a statistical preference for the generic word for God, the Hebrew word being Elohim, in the second book of the Psalter, that is Psalms 42-72. Delitzsch notes that in the Book 1 the proper name Yahweh occurs 272 times, and the generic title Elohim occurs 15 times. But in Book II Elohim occurs 164 times and Yahweh occurs only 30 times. So you can see there's a very clear preference for one term over the other in these two books.

But there is not only a statistical preference for one term for God over another. In these two books but even more convincing is a study of the parallel psalms found in these two books. Here in these parallel psalms it will be noted that in Book I the parallel psalm uses the term Yahweh for God but in its parallel in Book II the word Elohim is found. For example parallel psalms in Book I and II are Psalms 14 and Psalm 53. You might just compare them if you have your Bible in front of you, look at Psalm 14 you will

read, “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works. There is none that doeth good.” Again Psalm 53 in the second Book, “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. Corrupt are they and have done abominable iniquity. There is none that doeth good.” But now note the change in verse 2. You note that in these parallel psalms in verse 2, Book I says, “The LORD” in the English Bible with the capital in your King James, with a capital R, capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D, showing that it is a translation of the proper name for God, the Tetragrammaton probably being Yahweh. “Yahweh looked down from heaven upon the children of men,” but in the parallel, in Psalm 53:2, “God,” Elohim, “looked down from heaven upon the children of men.” And this sort of phenomenon of the switch from Yahweh to Elohim occasions this designation of referring to Book I as the Yahwisti Psalter and Book II as the Elohistc Psalter. Another parallel you may wish to study on your own is Psalm 40:13 17 with its parallel in Psalm 70 which is verses 1 5.

You may note here again that commentators are once again at a loss to explain satisfactorily this difference. There are really two explanations offered here. One explanation can be found in the Westminster Dictionary of the Bible, where it is claimed, and I quote the authors there, “It is claimed that the name Elohim was substituted for the purpose of meeting a felt need in the worship inasmuch as this name lends itself more to the adoring contemplation of God and the fulness of that conception.” In other words it was a subliminal need within the community to change the name from the limited proper name to the more exalted name, God. Well, that’s possible. I find it myself rather unconvincing. I’m inclined to follow others who follow the second suggestion that the difference is due to the tendency to substitute the Tetragrammaton, the proper name Yahweh, with the word God. In other words it is a latent tendency within Jewish theology to not use the proper name for God and instead of the proper name for God they would substitute the name God. And I think it’s due to this chronological tendency in the theological development of the Israelite religion. Having discussed now the Hebrew title and the English titles for the Book of Psalms and having discussed the organization of the Book of Psalms into five books we are now ready to discuss the history of the formation of The Book of Psalms.

We propose, following Leupold, that there are four stages in the development or in the formation of the book of Psalms as we presently have it. The first stage is the composition of the individual poem. The second stage is the collection of these poems into earlier collections that are not precisely the same as our present five fold collection. Then these earlier collections were brought together into our extant books. This would be the third stage. And then the fourth stage would be the work of the final editor giving unity to the work. I like the way Christoph Barth describes it. He says, "Anyone who seeks to understand this development should think of the way a river is formed. It takes innumerable little springs and streams to feed even a brook and many brooks and small rivers must flow into its long meandering course before the full width of the river flows down to the sea." The first stage in the development, then, we propose is that of individual poems.

As you study the poems or the songs, the hymns of the Old Testament you discover that they can be classified into two categories. Some of these individual songs did not find their way into The Psalter and others of them were collected into the Israel's hymnbook. To illustrate songs that were not adopted into Israel's hymnbook we might think for example of the song of Miriam composed at the crossing of the Red Sea and recorded in Exodus 15; or the sons of Moses upon the entrance into the land recorded in Deuteronomy 32; or the song of Deborah upon the victory over Sisera recorded in Judges 5; or the song of Hannah upon the news that she would conceive and have a child from the Lord, recorded in I Samuel 2; or the song of Jonah, the hymn of Jonah declared a praise song in the belly of the great fish recorded in Jonah 2. None of these songs found their way into the corporate hymnbook. On the other hand some hymns did find their way into the corporate hymnbook. For example the song of David that he composed when the Lord delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies and out of the hand of Saul. This is recorded both in II Samuel 22 and in Psalm 18. If you have your Bible in front of you you might take a look at II Samuel 22 where we read, "And David spoke unto the Lord the words of this song in the day that the Lord had delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies, and out of the hand of Saul." And then in the rest of the chapter we have this song that David composed on that occasion. That particular hymn is found in Psalm 18. You might see the same heading in the superscription of Psalm 18. Here we read, "To the chief musician." Now here you see by that title in the superscription, "to the chief musician," that the hymn was handed over to the one in charge

of the music at the temple. “A psalm of David, the servant of the Lord who spoke unto the Lord the words of this song in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul, and he said.” As you study this song you discover that it has not only been adopted but it has also been adapted to the corporate worship of the people of God. Now for lack of time we’re going to have to conclude our lecture here and we will continue the discussion on the history of the formation of The Psalter at the beginning of the next lecture.