

History of the Formation of the Psalms

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In the second lecture on The Book of Psalms we will continue and conclude our discussion regarding the formation of The Psalter, then we will discuss the numbering in the Psalms. After discussing the numbering in The Psalms, we will discuss the text of the Psalms. Thirdly, we will discuss the headings of the Psalms and then having discussed the headings of the Psalms I will say a word about Hebrew poetry.

First of all then, let us conclude our discussion regarding the formation of The Book of Psalms as we presently know it. We suggested that there were four stages in the development of The Book of Psalms as it has been handed on to us today. First of all we said there was the first stage of the composition of individual poems. The second stage is that these poems were brought together into early collections and these early collections of Psalms differ from the present extant division into five books. There are three evidences in the Psalms themselves, or in the Old Testament, that indicate that there were earlier collections than has been preserved for us.

The first indication of this is found in Psalm 72:20. At the end of Psalm 72 :20 we read that AThe prayers of David, the son of Jesse are ended. Now it is interesting to observe that actually after Psalm 72 there are in the rest of the Psalter fifteen more Psalms by David so that this statement was probably appended to an earlier collection when what is now Psalm 72 concluded a collection of Davidic Psalms. I would say that it's importance here is to show us that Psalm 72 is the last prayer that David offered in his life and that is quite significant in this particular Psalm because David is praying for his son and .I believe ultimately his greater Son, that this ultimate Son of his would bring God's kingdom upon this earth.

The second notice that tells us there was an earlier collection of Psalms is found in II Chronicles 29:30. Here we read that

“Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer.” This suggests to us that there were at one time

two collections in Hezekiah’s time, the words of David and the words of Asaph. Both of the latter, the words of Asaph are presently found in the third book of the extant Psalter, Psalm 73-83, but one should compare his Psalm 50 in the second book which is also a Psalm by Asaph. So first of all we noted that the statement in Psalm 72:20, “the prayers of David, the son of Jesse are ended,” is an indication of an earlier collection of Davidic Psalms.. Secondly, the statement in II Chronicles 29:30 that “Hezekiah the king commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer,” suggest that at that time there were two distinct collections.

The third notice is found in the superscriptions of Psalms 120-134, the songs of degrees or the songs of the ascent. I suspect that these are pilgrimage songs to be sung on the going up to Jerusalem and almost certainly Psalms 120-134 represent an earlier collection of Psalms that is those songs composed for the going up to Mount Zion at the pilgrimages.

The third stage in the development then was the bringing of more psalms into consideration and the collection into the five extant books as we know them. The collection of these smaller anthologies and to the books as we now know them probably represents then the third phase in the formation of The Psalter. Leopold attempts to reconstruct the development of the five books along the chronological lines we are suggesting here. He says, “What is at least beginning to become evident is that different corrections were quite obviously made by different persons in successive periods spread over quite a space of time.” So then we begin with individual psalms, these in turn were put into early collections, these in turn were then expanded into the five books as we know them.

And now the final and fourth stage is the work of the final editor under the supervision of the Holy Spirit giving us the present work as we know them. The work of the final editor, then, represents the fourth and last stage in the formation of The Psalter. Delitzsch points out, “The collection bears the impress of one ordering mind.” Almost all agree that Psalms 1 and 2 form a fitting introduction to the entire book and that Psalms 145-150 constitute a grand finale for the book. This final arrangement

probably took place in the post exilic period and in the first two psalms we hear the major themes of the religion of the people in the post exilic period, namely their concentration on the law and their hope for the Messiah. These are two dominant aspects in post exilic Judaism and you see then in the first psalm with its emphasis upon keeping the law of God and in the second psalm the hope for the coming of the Christ and His kingdom.

Now having discussed the formation of The Psalter, we will now move into a discussion regarding the numbering in The Book of Psalms. Under this heading I want to discuss two things in particular. First of all, the way the Psalms themselves are numbered in The Psalter, and secondly, the way the numbers, the verses are numbered in The Psalter.

Now regarding the number of psalms in The Psalter, we should note here that there is a difference in the numbering between the Massoretic text and the Septuagint. And we will also notice in this discussion that some texts add an additional psalm, namely the 151st psalm. Now the Septuagint followed by the Latin Vulgate differs from the Hebrew division of the psalms in the following ways. In the traditional Jewish text which we call the Massoretic text we have Psalm 18 and these are numbered exactly the same way in the Septuagint. Now what I've said for the Septuagint would follow as well for Jerome's Latin Vulgate. But when we come to Psalms 9 and 10 in the traditional Jewish text we discover that in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, these two psalms of the traditional Jewish text constitute that one psalm. As a result, because two psalms become one in the Septuagint, from Psalm 11 to 113 the Septuagint has one less so that Psalms 11 to 113 in the traditional Jewish text are Psalms 10 to 112 in the Greek translation. Again in the traditional Jewish text, Psalms 114 and 115 are two distinct psalms but in the Greek translation those two psalms, 114 and 115, constitute but one psalm, its 113th psalm. But when we come to Psalm 116 we discover that whereas the traditional Jewish text has but one psalm the Septuagint divides this up into two psalms. So that Psalm 116:1-9 in the traditional Jewish text is equivalent to Psalm 114 in the Greek text and Psalm 116:10-19 in the Massoretic text is equivalent to Psalm 115 in the Septuagint. So that still leaves the Massoretic text having one more psalm than the Greek translation so that Psalms 117 to 146 is equivalent to Psalms 116 to 145 in the Septuagint. But when we come to the 147th Psalm once again we discover a different divisioning of the psalm. Whereas Psalm 147:1-20 is one psalm in the Septuagint it is broken apart into two psalms so that Psalm

147:1 11 is equal to the 146th Psalm in the Septuagint and Psalm 147:12 20 is equal to the 147th Psalm in the Septuagint. As a result, now they're together again, Psalms 148 150 are identical in both books, both the traditional Jewish text and the Greek translation. So that as Leopold correctly cautions, "This difference must be born in mind when one is reading books by Roman Catholic authors or when consulting the Vulgate or the Septuagint."

Now when we're talking about numberings in the Psalms and how the Massoretic text and the Septuagint differ, we might notice here that in the latest published manuscript from Qumran we find a 151st psalm. Now this 151st psalm is also found in the Septuagint but in the Septuagint it is not numbered, we call it supernumerary, that is there is no number given to it. But in the Syro Hexaplar it is numbered the 151st psalm. Now what do we make of a total psalm like this that is not found in the traditional Jewish text. In my judgment there is no doubt whatsoever that this is not an original psalm, that it is really a midrash on I Samuel 16:1 7. Let me just read you the first, the superscription of this psalm and the first verse as it's found in the Qumran scroll and it differs somewhat from the Septuagint which you have more ready access to. The superscription to the 151st psalm reads, "At the beginning of David's power after the prophet of God had anointed him." Now here's how the psalm begins, "Then I saw a Philistine uttering defiances from the ranks of the Philistines." Now I think you can see here that the whole tone of this psalm is different than we find in the other Biblical psalms. As Sanders says, J. A. Sanders who edited the psalm in *The Psalm Scroll of Qumran Cave II*, in Vol. 4 in *The Discoveries in the Judean Desert of Jordan* published by Oxford in 1965, page 61, he says, "The tone is quite unbiblical." And he goes through the rest of the discussion to demonstrate that. So I feel that we should discard this psalm as being an original composition by David, not an original part of the collection and its clearly to me a late Jewish work, a midrash interpretation of I Samuel chapter 16 and David's fight against Goliath.

Now having said a word about the numbering of the psalms in *The Book of Psalms*, let me say a word about the way in which the verses are number in *The Psalms*. Now as you are aware the super

scriptions are not numbered in the Septuagint or in the English versions, but these superscriptions are numbered in the Hebrew text. So therefore very frequently where you do have a superscription, especially when there is a historical notice, in the

Hebrew text that will be listed as the first verse, but in the English Bible it will not be numbered. The result of that is that in many psalms the Hebrew text has one more verse than the English versions and as a result when you are reading your literature you will see a double reference. For example, Psalm 45, the psalm composed for the marriage of the king, the superscription in the English Bible, “To the chief musician upon Shoshannim, for the sons of Korah, Maschil, A Song of loves,” that is not numbered. But that is the first verse in the Hebrew Bible. As a result what in the English Bible is verse one, “My heart is overflowing with the good matter,” that in the Hebrew Bible is verse 2. So very frequently the Hebrew Bible’s verse division is one higher than in the English Bible and if you’re working with your Hebrew text, or working with commentaries based on the Hebrew text, you must be aware of that. Now having discussed these numberings, the way the psalms are numbered, the second thing I want to discuss here is the text of The Psalms.

Now it is possible to distinguish among the manuscripts at least three distinct text types. These are the traditional Jewish text, the Massoretic text, secondly the Septuagint or the Greek translation, the text upon which the Greek translation was made, and thirdly the discovery of a manuscript of these psalms found at Qumran. Now these three text types differ. The Massoretic text differs from the text behind the Greek translation. And the Qumran scroll in turn differs from both the Hebrew text and the text of the Greek translation. Now which of these three texts is the more reliable and should we have confidence in? In my own judgment, and I’ll just have to say this rather arbitrarily, the Massoretic text is by far the superior text type. Now I base that conclusion upon my own study of these various texts of the psalms and using the normal Canons of textual criticism, namely you reject that reading which you can explain away. You keep the reading you cannot explain away. Most readings in the Septuagint and the Qumran scroll you can clearly demonstrate by the canons of textual criticism that they are secondary. They are secondarily introduced into the text. You will discover as you work with these texts that the traditional Jewish text is rugged, it is difficult, it preserves archaisms, it has not been smoothed over. It has not suffered the corruption of later Jewish theology so that it is really the superior text type and if there’s any disagreement between these three text types I would encourage you to hold fast to the traditional Massoretic text. I may also comment that most of the conjectured readings found in the Biblia Hebraica edited by Kittel as the general editor of the entire Biblia Hebraica published in 1937 and the book of Psalms

in particular was edited by Franz Buhl, most of these are totally worthless and they're rejected by scholars today. I would also say the extreme free dom of the numbering of the text as displayed by say, Charles Briggs in The International Critical Commentary series - they are generally rejected today. You see DaHood, in his Anchor Bible Study in The Anchor Bible Series published by Doubleday in 1966 has demonstrated that the Massoretic text preserves very ancient readings. For example, I read from DaHood in his work on the psalms, this is from Roman numeral page 29. He says, "An examination of the vocabulary of these psalms reveals that virtually every word, image and parallelism are now recorded in Bronze Age Canaanite text" so that the very wording of these psalms shows that these psalms have been carefully preserved over the centuries. And the Massoretic text is a highly reliable text.

Now what about the Septuagint? Well again, I have to treat this rather quickly in a lecture of this sort. Let me say that the Septuagint demonstrates that it has been reworked for theological reasons. Now to see a complete discussion of this would encourage you to read an unpublished Th.D. thesis from Princeton Theological Seminary written by Howard Matthew Ervin. It was published at Princeton in 1962. The title of his thesis is , Theological Aspects of the Septuagint of the Book of Psalms. And it can be procured through University microfilms, #62 5847. Now I'm looking at Ervin's work and you can see how the Septuagint translated has toned down and changed the text for theological reasons. For example, his first chapter, chapter I, is entitled "Theological Toning Down," and under this he lists such changes made in the text as "the mitigating of the destructive activities of God in relation to man." Then he discusses the toning down of God's destructive activities in nature. Again the substitution of an abstract for a concrete term. Again under this chapter of "Theological Toning Down," avoidance of actions offensive to the translator's idea of God's transcendence and spirituality in the creation and support of life. Or again, the elimination of the association of human weapons and utensils with God. Then in his next chapter he entitles, AAnti-anthropomorphisms, A that is he, verse one, avoidance of undue familiarity with God, or avoidance of attributing physical form or parts to God, avoidance of attributing human feelings to God, avoidance of attributing motion and place to God. In other words wherever God is too much like man, the text is changed. One can see this very readily for example in Psalm 142:4, if you'll turn with me for just a moment. Psalm 142:4, where David says, "I have looked on my right hand and beheld but there was no man

that would know me.” Now in the Hebrew text it doesn’t read, “I looked on my right hand,” its an imperative to God. He likens God to a man and he says, “Look on my right hand and see there is no man that knows me” or that would know me and this was just too strong theology that David would say to God, “Look” and “look at me” and question or even imply that God didn’t see everything and as a result the text is changed, “I looked on my right hand and I beheld.” I may also comment here that that particular reading, “I looked on my right hand” is found in the Qumran scroll as well so that we know that many of these changes were not made solely by the translator but they were already made in the Hebrew text from which he translates his word.

While we’re talking about the Septuagint we might not only notice that the text has been changed for theological readings but we should also note here that Jerome’s Vulgate, the Latin version and even our English versions have leaned very heavily on the Septuagint for their understanding of the Hebrew text and I may comment with regard to Jerome’s translation that he actually made three translations of the Septuagint into Latin. The first two translations he made were based on the Septuagint and his third translation was based on the tradition of Jewish text, the Massoretic text. His translations then are three, the first one is called the Psalterium Roman and this is really a cursory revision of the old Latin Psalter and he was revising it according to the Greek translation, the Septuagint. His second translation is called the Gallican Psalter and this is a revision of the old Latin Psalter according to the fifth column of Origen’s Hexapla and this translation is the text of the Vulgate. Most of the Vulgate was made directly from the Hebrew text but not in the case of the Psalter. The Vulgate in this case is based upon Origen’s essential work in the fifth column of his great Hexapla. His third and final work is entitled Psalterium Iuxta Hebraeos Hieronymi, that is The Psalter according to the Hebrew, done by Jerome. This was a completely new translation based on the Massoretic text that that particular translation is not in the edited and published Vulgates. So far then I’ve talked about the Massoretic text and showed its superiority. Secondly, I’ve talked about the Septuagint and showed that it has been contaminated by theological toning down and also I’ve noted that the Jerome’s translation found in the Vulgate is based upon the Septuagint.

Finally let me say a word about the text of Qumran. This represents but a third text type which is also inferior to the text type of the Massoretic text and I’ve already given you one indication of that,

for example in Psalm 142:4 instead of saying, “Look on my right hand,” this text also reads, “I looked on my right hand” in order to avoid the anthropomorphism. I suppose the best discussion of the text of the psalms is found in Edward Dalglish’s excellent work, *Psalm Fifty one, In The Light of Ancient Near Eastern Patternism*, published in Leiden in 1962 and you can read here pages 56 and following.

Now the next thing we want to discuss in this lecture, having discussed the numbering in the psalms and the text of the psalms, now I want to discuss the superscriptions or the headings of these psalms. Now the material found in the superscriptions or the headings of the psalms can be divided into six categories. Sometimes they include information regarding the author of the psalm. Not only does one find information regarding the author but there are technical names to designate the various types of psalms, for example it can be called the psalm, that is a song accompanied by the plucking of the strings of an instrument. Sometimes it’s called a song, sometimes a *maschil*, that is a contemplative poem, sometimes a *miktam*, whose root meaning is not too clear. It can be called a prayer as one can find at the end of Habakkuk 3 and sometimes it’s called praise as in Psalm 145. There is not only material regarding the author or technical names to designate the types of psalms, but thirdly there are musical terms. These include “to the chief musician” or a “*jeduthun*” as in Psalms 39, 62 and 77 *A’Neginoth*, *A Alamoth*, *A Sheminith*, *A Nehiloth*, *A Gittith*, and we might just briefly comment here on the word *Selah*. *Selah* is not found in the superscriptions and we, first of all I’d like to say about *Selah* is that it should be pronounced. One can see this by the Massoretic accentuation system. It is very clear from the Massoretic tones indicated with this word that it was pronounced as part of the text. Its root meaning comes from the word *sàlal* which means to lift up and it probably has the idea of saying something emphatically. It’s something like our hallelujah, lift it up, say it out loud. It’s sort of like our hip hip hooray and it gives a great emphasis.

Now there are not only musical terms but there are melody indicators, for example, in Psalm 45 and 60 and 69 and 89 we read it’s “to the lilies,” and Psalms 53 and 83 we have the melody indicated. We’re told it’s “*Mahalath*” but the meaning is quite obscure. Psalm 22, it was to be set to the music of the “hind of the morning” perhaps. Psalm 56 was to be sung “According to the silent dove of the distances.” Psalm 57 and 58 and 59 and 75 were to be set to the music of “do not destroy” and the superscription

in Psalm 9 is disputed.

Now in addition to having statements regarding the author or technical names to designate the various types of psalms and musical terms and melody indicators, there are also liturgical indicators. For example we're told that Psalm 92 was to be sung on Sabbath. We're told the Psalm 100 is to be sung as an acknowledgment or with an acknowledgment offering and I'll have to discuss that later on. We're told in Psalm 38 and Psalm 70 that these were to bring the psalmist to the remembrance of Yahweh and we'll comment upon that later on. Psalm 102 we're told is the prayer of the afflicted when he pines away and pours forth his complaint before Yahweh. And then we've already commented briefly on Psalms 120 134 which are song of degrees or song of ascent or perhaps songs for the pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem.

Psalm 30 we're told is for the dedication of the house. The Shiggaion in Psalm 7 is quite obscure. And then finally in the sixth category we find as well historical notices telling us on what occasion in the life of David the psalm was composed as in Psalm 3 when he fled from Absalom and you'll find these historical notices in Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63 and 142. In the next lecture we will discuss the historical credibility of these superscriptions.