

## **PSALMS : Interpretive principles**

The Psalms are among the most treasured portions of Scripture. They appeal in an intimate and personal way to the heart and soul of the believer. Wordsworth described poetry as "*the overflow of spontaneous emotion recollected in tranquillity.*" The Psalms reflect the reflection of the Psalmist on his feelings and faith in various circumstances of life. It has been suggested that in the Psalms we find man speaking to God from his heart and soul. At the same time, as hymns of the communal body of believers, the Psalms have a universality that transcends the experiences of the individual believer and sometimes they are the words of the messiah Himself that we hear.

The Psalms were functional songs used for worship. They were means by which people spoke to God. As such, they serve for us as a guide for individual and corporate worship, as examples of honest self expression, and of reflecting and meditating on the things God has done for us. "... *In some of the Psalms, the personal experiences of the poets are most prominent, in others the communal life of Israel and of the Church finds expression; and in still others, the humiliated and exalted Christ is heard.*" (Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation, P. 155,156.)

The following principles should be observed. keeping in mind the principles of word-meaning, figures of speech, context, poetic form, etc. that we have already discussed.

1. If possible, study carefully the historical occasion for the Psalm, however don't arbitrarily assign one. And treat each Psalm as a literary unit.
2. The character and frame of mind of the Poet should be carefully considered. We need to enter into the "attitude, outlook, the spiritual and psychological mood of the poet when he composed the Psalm" and observe carefully any changes that take place as the Psalm progresses. These may have to be inferred from the Psalm itself.
3. As Psalms of the church and expressions of regenerate hearts, God's will should be sought in them and not merely the feelings of the poet.
4. In dealing with Messianic Psalms, a careful distinction needs to be made between the Psalms and portions of Psalms that are directly messianic and those that are indirectly messianic. The criteria are: Is it quoted in the NT as messianic? Is it a Psalm that speaks about the Messiah? Is there something in the Psalm applicable only to the Messiah., or is it not exclusively fulfilled in Him?
5. Some Psalms call for curses and the destruction of the wicked. (Examples: 106:6-20, 137:7-9) They should be regarded as expressions of persons incensed at wickedness, even to the point of forgetting to leave judgment to God. At times it is really the sin, not the sinner, at whom the curses are leveled. Berkhof suggests these are "*not utterances of personal vindictiveness, but of the Church's aversion to sin, embodied in the sinner.*" (p. 157)

The Psalter has been divided into five books: Book 1: Psalms 1 - 41; Book 2: Psalms 42 - 72; Book 3: Psalms 73 - 89; Book 4: Psalms 90 - 106; and Book 5: Psalms 107 - 150. Within these groupings are a number of sub-categories. Each ends with a doxology.

Authors: David: 73 - about half, mostly in Books 1 and 2, Moses 1, Solomon 2, the sons of Asaph 12, and by the sons of Korah 10, many psalms have no indication of authorship.

While the "five" books of the Psalter are not categorically arranged, we can take note of the following classifications, noting some overlap in them:

- **Prayers related to troubled circumstances and faith and trust** (about half of the Psalms) in particular - 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, 131
- **Laments** (about sixty, including: individual - 3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 120; and corporate laments - 12, 44, 80, 94, 137. These have six elements: address, complaint, trust, deliverance, assurance and praise,
- **Psalms of Praise** (about forty incl. the **Hallels** - 136, 146-50)- these can be grouped as individual or corporate); Of God the Creator - 8, 19, 148; of God the Protector - 66, 100, 111, 114, 149; Lord of History - 33, 103, 113, 117, 145-147.
- **Psalms of the Righteous man** - 1, 15, 101, 112, 133
- **Royal Psalms** - 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144; **Enthronement** - 24, 29, 47, 93, 95-99
- **Penitential** - 32, 51
- **Historical** - 78, 81, 105, 106 - **Salvation History** 78, 105, 106, 135, 136
- **Alphabetic** (Acrostic, uses the Hebrew alphabet of 22 letters) - 119, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145
- **Ascent** These songs were sung by those on pilgrimage up to Jerusalem - 120-134.
- **Thanksgiving** Individual - 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138; and Community - 65, 67, 75, 107, 124, 136. Their elements: Introduction, distress, appeal, deliverance, and testimony.
- **Celebration and Affirmation** - Covenant renewal - 50, 81; Davidic Covenant - 89, 132
- **Songs of Zion** (Jerusalem) - 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122
- **Messianic Psalms**: 2, 16, 99, 40, 45, 69, 110, 72, and 89 are Messianic, the N.T. also quotes 8, 4, 68, 102, 109 and 118, which have indirect Messianic references.
- **Wisdom Psalms** - 1, 19b, 32, 34, 37, 49, 78, 111, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133 (Cf Prov 8)

For more on their organization see [Out of The Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today](#) by Bernard Anderson. Among the best commentaries on the Psalms are Calvin's [Commentary on Psalms](#) and Charles Spurgeon's [A Treasury of David](#).