

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 emotionally from his heart and soul. At the same time, as hymns of the communal body of believers, the Psalms met many types of worship needs and were focal points in the religious life of God's people. 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 function of the Psalms is to give us "inspired models of how to talk or sing to God and how to think reflectively about God." They are about our emotional responses to God and those hostile to Him. And how we should relate honestly to God in times of both blessing and joy; and in times of grief, despair and suffering. They help us worship God and and reflect upon His works.

Their authors include David [73 psalms - about half, mostly in Books 1 and 2], Moses 1, Solomon 2, the sons of Asaph 12, and by the sons of Korah 10, though many psalms have no indication of authorship.

The following interpretive principles should be observed. keeping in mind the principles of parallelism, repetition, word-meaning, figures of speech, context, poetic form, etc. that we have already discussed. Hebrew poetry may use a variety of structures such as *alliteration* (lines begin with the same letter of the alphabet), or *acrostics* (lines begin with successive letters of the alphabet) [see Psa 119 – 8 verses of each letter], or *assonance* (similar sounding words).

1. Observe the forms of parallelism, grouping the lines in pairs or triads, and its overall and strophic (stanza) patterns. Study the figurative language and imagery. How does the Psalms build and intensify the thought flow using both these elements. Be sensitive to its type – statements about God and His relationship to his people differ from type to type – from those in a lament to those in a hymn of praise, for example.
2. If possible, study carefully the historical occasion for the Psalm, however don't arbitrarily assign one. And treat each Psalm as a literary unit. Study it as a whole before drawing conclusions – the whole is the key to the parts!
3. The character and frame of mind of the Poet should be carefully considered. We need to enter into the emotional world of the poet, his attitude, outlook, his spiritual and psychological mood 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.
5. 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? See the Psalm in its original sense first, and then in its messianic sense.
6. 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: Each ends with a doxology. Within these groupings are a number of sub-categories.

Introduction: Psalms 1 & 2

Book 1: Psalms 3 – 41 - Centers on David – most are by him and seek divine protection from his enemies;

Book 2: Psalms 42 – 72 - Also centered on David; however 42-49 are by the Sons of Korah

Book 3: Psalms 73 - 89 - Mainly a series of laments on the broken covenant attributed to Asaph

Book 4: Psalms 90 – 106 - A new hope with Yahweh as King and His mighty acts of deliverance – there are seven references to Moses in this section.

Book 5: Psalms 107 - 145. - Celebrating God's deliverance (from the exile?) including the **Hallels** 113-118 (sung at Hannakah and Passover) and the **Psalms of Ascent** 120-134 (which were sung along a pilgrimage up to Jerusalem.)

Conclusion: Psalms 146 – 150

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 both: 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** 113-118; 136, 146-50)- these also can be grouped as individual or corporate); Of God -- the Creator: 8, 19, 148; of God -- the Protector: 66, 100, 111, 114, 149; of God -- 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, offering, 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)