

An Introduction to the Psalms
A 2021 Lenten Series
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“The Church’s Hymnbook” – written over a period of at least 500 years, by a variety of authors: David, Solomon, Asaph – a descendant of Levi, and the leading musician when the Ark was brought to Jerusalem, “the sons of Korah” – Korah was the great grandson of Levi, and the ancestor of a group of sacred musicians mentioned in 12 of the Psalms, Moses – cited in Psalm 90, one tradition says he wrote Psalms 90 – 100.

Different ways to study the Psalms

1. According to form/type/genre
 - a. praise – e.g., 150
 - b. individual or community thanksgiving - e.g., 30, 46
 - c. individual or community lament or complaint – e.g., 64, 60
 - d. confession – e.g., 51, 107 – cf. the sin of Achan (Joshua 7:19 – “give glory to the Lord God of Israel and make confession to him”)
 - e. historical – e.g., 3
 - f. liturgical – e.g., 136 (sometimes called “the Great Hallel”)
Note: some are addressed to God, some to others, some to self (“Bless the Lord, O my soul...”)
Within these categories, note that “psalm” means “praise,” or “song of praise” – all of them, ultimately, are songs of praise.
2. According to their divisions, or “Books”
 - a. five divisions: 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150
 - b. each concludes with a 1 or 2 verse doxology (150 is entirely a doxology)
 - c. perhaps the 5 divisions were somehow correlated with the 5 books of Moses
3. Within that structure there are identifiable subsections:
 - a. 3-5 considered a unity related to David fleeing from his own son, Absalom, and crying out to God (a cycle of supplication and confidence is repeated in each of these three Psalms, and they are often read as a unit).
 - b. 113-118 – the Hallel (or Egyptian Hallel) – note the similarity to “Hallelujah” – both words derive from the Hebrew for “praise” – a set of songs sung and chanted during the festivals of Passover and Tabernacles (Jesus and his friends likely sang one or more of these after the Last Supper. c.f. Matthew 26:30)
 - c. 120-134 – the “Songs of Ascent” used by pilgrims whenever they “went/go up” to Jerusalem.
Note: Psalm 119 (standing between these two groups of celebration Psalms) *exemplifies what it enjoins* – namely that we learn to meditate.

Probably the meaning of the word “maskil” – 13 Psalms are called “maskils,” including 119.

Note the association with King David – 73 of them are ascribed to him, not quite half.

1. (The superscriptions were added much later, so may not be strictly accurate).
2. David was called the “sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Samuel 23:1, RSV).
3. Book II concludes: “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended” – 72:20.
4. The book as a whole has been associated with David from antiquity because it is composed of the sort of Psalms he composed so supremely well.
5. This series might well be titled, “The Diary of a Poet.”

Two additional “handles” to aid your study

1. The key to Hebrew poetry: three types of “parallelism” (noticed only in early 1700s!):
 - a. Synonymous – the 2nd line repeats the thought of the 1st, e.g., 54:1-4
 - b. Antithetic(al) – the 2nd line presents some direct point of opposition to the 1st, e.g., 1:6, and in a larger sense, contrast 1:1-3 with 1:4-6
 - c. Synthetic – the 2nd line supplements or completes the 1st, e.g., 3:4
2. “Selah” a kind of musical direction, probably meaning either “pause” or “lift up your voice” (i.e., crescendo) or possibly an indication instrumental music is to be added here. In any event, “Selah” is to be *observed*, not read aloud.

A Thumbnail Sketch of the life of David (since so many of the Psalms come out of his life)

1. Called from a humble family living in Bethlehem, the youngest of 8 brothers, still a teenager and shepherd when anointed by Samuel to be the (future) King of Israel as the successor to Saul (the “great tragic figure of the O.T.”).
2. Long and difficult years before David actually rules. His musical skills land him a job as minstrel and balladeer to Saul himself who is emotionally tormented. David thus has a kind of apprenticeship in the royal court.
3. When the Philistine giant, Goliath, blasphemes God and ridicules Israel, David goes up against him in the power of the Lord, having been trained in warding off lions and bears seeking to devour his sheep.
4. His defeat of Goliath steels the hearts of the Israeli army and they rout the Philistines, but Saul grows jealous of David’s fame and popularity (“Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands”) and eventually tries to destroy him.
5. On at least two occasions David could have killed Saul, but he says, “I will not touch the Lord’s anointed.” (1 Samuel 24 & 26)
6. Finally, Saul himself is killed and David returns to Judah where he assumes the kingship over his own tribe and rules for 7 ½ years.
7. The opposition against him comes to an end, and he becomes King over the united nation of 12 tribes, and rules for another 33 years – a time of tremendous activity, expansion, wealth, and building. David wants to build the Temple but Solomon does that instead.

8. David's disastrous fall into adultery and murder, and his repentance. Consequences follow him all his life, but out of his unholy union with Bathsheba the Messianic line is established.

Question: when do you suppose he wrote Psalm 23? When he was a shepherd boy? When he was at the height of his powers as the "Shepherd of Israel"? Or after his fall and restoration by *his* Good Shepherd?