



Psalms

St. Paul Bible College



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Introduction

Psalms

- ❖ Origin in the human experience

They are charged with emotions and written with experience like ours

- ❖ Source of theological reflection

The Psalms could be seen as a synthesis of the OT as St Basil declared, “The Book of Psalms contains a complete theology.”

The Psalms - the Hymn Book of the Jewish Synagogue

Three times a day, the Jews prayed the Psalms for 3000 years

The Psalms - The Hymn Book of the Christian Church

Christians all over the world faithfully pray the Psalms

The Psalms - Hymn Book of the Cosmic Church

Psalms are treasure of the whole universe

Name

‘Psalms’ comes from the Greek word ‘*Psalmoi*’ which takes its origin from the Hebrew term ‘*Mizmor*’ meaning “a song sung to the accompaniment of string instruments.”

Author/s

- 73 psalms appear under the name David
- 12 under the name Asaph
- 11 under the name sons of Korah
- 2 under the name Solomon;
- 1 to Moses (Ps 90);
- 1 to Ethan (Ps 89);
- Ps 88 is attributed to two persons (A psalm of the sons of Korah and a Makil of Heman)

Time/period of the Psalms

Many conclusions were arrived at by many scholars.

All possible dates, from 10th century BC, up to 2nd century BC, namely, from the time of monarchy up to the time of the Maccabees have been proposed.

Broadly it can be said that they are written:

- ❖ Pre exilic (before 587 BC)
- ❖ Post exilic (After 587 BC)

Division of Psalms

1. Pss 1- 41: (41:13 - Blessed be the Lord...)
2. Pss 42 - 72 (72:18 - Blessed be the Lord...)
3. Pss 73 - 89 (89:52 - Blessed be the Lord...)
4. Pss 90 - 106 (106:48 - Blessed be the Lord...)
5. Pss 107 - 150 (150:6 - Blessed be the Lord...)

Types of Psalms

Psalms can be divided into two general categories.

1. Liturgical Psalms

Many of the Psalms fall under this category. They were used within the formal settings of worship, within the temple and later within the synagogue

2. Non-liturgical Psalms or Spiritual Psalms

These Psalms do not presuppose any particular cultic context. They could be sung or prayed anywhere.

Basing on these two broader categories, we can make further subdivisions:

1. Hymns

➤ **Hymns proper**

They praise and thank God either for creation or redemption or for both: (Eg. Ps 8; 19; 29; 33; 100; 103; 104; 111; 114; 117; 135; 136; 145 - 150)

➤ **Yahweh's Kingship Psalms**

In “Yahweh’s kingship Psalms,” Israel praises God as her own ruler. God is hailed as king (Num 23:21; Ps 22:29) by virtue of the fact that He is the creator (Ps 74:12) and the redeemer (Isa 33: 22; Ps 145:11-13).

➤ **Canticles of Zion**

These are hymns in which Zion (Jerusalem), where God resides, is praised (Egs. Ps 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 122).

2. Laments

They are the confident cries of the poor, the lonely, the sick, the dying and the sinful people. There are:

Lamentations of the individuals (Eg. Ps 5; 6; 7; 10; 13; 17; 22; 25; 26; 28; 31)

Lamentations of the community (Eg. Ps 12; 44; 58; 60; 74; 77; 79; 80; 82; 83)

3. Confident Psalms

They are the expressions the total reliance on God in moments of tribulations and crisis

Confidence of the Individuals: Individual Israelites expressing their trust in God in moments of hardship, pain etc (Eg. Ps 3; 4; 11; 16; 23; 27; 62; 121; 131).

Confidence of the Community: Groups of people or Israel as a community raise their mind, placing their entire reliance on God (Eg. Ps 115; 125; 129).

4. Thanksgiving Psalms

People who are saved from grave perils and dangers, express their gratitude to God.

Thanksgiving of the Individuals: An individual praises and thanks the Lord for favours received (Eg. Ps 9; 30; 32; 34; 40; 41; 92; 107; 116; 130).

Thanksgiving of the Community: Groups or the community itself come to the Temple to pay their gratitude to God for saving them from wars, famine or other catastrophes (Eg. Ps 65-68; 118; 124).

5. Royal Psalms

While Yahweh's kingship psalms sing about God as king, Royal psalms sing about the king as God, namely the king as representative of God (Eg. Ps 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132; 144).

The king is in the place of Yahweh; he is the delegate of Yahweh (Exod 15:18; Num 23:21; 1 Sam 8:7; 12:12; 1 Kgs 22:19).

Hence, his throne in Jerusalem is called "the throne of God" (1 Chr 29:23).

6. Wisdom Psalms

These Psalms are concerned with educating the people in good manners and godly behaviour in their day today lives.

They are subdivided accordingly into four groups:

1. Wisdom Proper

These Psalms have clear wisdom influence (Ps 1; 37; 49; 73; 91; 119; 127; 128; 133; 139)

2. Historical Psalms

these psalms have the elements of hymn, thanksgiving and even wisdom are to be found in the context of history (ps 78, 105)

3. Liturgical Psalms

Liturgical acts determine the articulation of these psalms. Though scattered through many psalms, yet three psalms (Ps 15; 24; 134) are conspicuous of this group.

4. Prophetic Exhortations

Psalms prophesy (1Chr 25:1; 2 Chr 20:14).

They rely on prophetic literature, especially Isaiah whose style they adapt for their teaching. They have prophetic literary elements such as oracles, exhortations, promises, threats etc. They were written later.

When prophetic inspiration was institutionalized, and priesthood assumed the role of prophecy, we witness psalms of this type. Usually, like that of the prophets, blessings and curses are associated with these Psalms (Ps 14; 50; 52; 53; 75; 81; 95).

III. Hebrew Poetry and the Psalms

Psalms are excellent poetry with its literary styles.

- **Synonymous Parallelism:** Here the second verse or line repeats the idea of the first line or verse (Ps 16:9; 36:11; 59:2; 113:7; 127:3 etc).
- “My heart is glad - my soul rejoices” (Ps 16:9)
- “The wicked go astray from the womb; - they err from their birth” (Ps 58:3)
- “Praise him, all his angels; - praise him, all his hosts” (Ps 148:2)

Antithetic Parallelism: Here the thought of the first line is contrasted with the second (Ps 19:2; 20:8; 55:1; 107:34-35; 147:6 etc).

- “They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand” (Ps 20:8).
- “His anger is but for a moment, his favor is for a life time” (Ps 30:5).

Stair - like parallelism: Here each line progresses in idea and expands and emphasizes it,

- "The voice of the Lord is powerful; voice of the Lord is lull of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars" (Ps 29:4-5; also see Ps 118:10-12) etc.

VI. Theology of the Psalms

The theology of Psalm reveals the nature of God and man

1. Monotheistic God: For the people of Israel, there is no other God except Yahweh (Ps 18:31; 83:18; 115:3-7; 135:15-17). Some chief attributes of God:

A. God of Steadfast Love (*Hesed*)

B. Merciful God (*Rehem*)

C. God of fidelity (*Emeth*)

D. Redeemer God (*Goel*)

E. Holy God (*Kadosh*)

F. God of Justice (*Sedegah*)

G. Lord of Nature

H. Ruler of History

I. Living God

2. Human Beings

The Psalmist praises the greatness of the human beings (“image and likeness of God” Gen 1:27) and their nothingness before God (“what are human beings?” Ps 8:4).

A. Social Being

B. Yearning for God

C. The Poor of Yahweh (*‘Ani’, ‘Anaw’*)

4. Spiritual Inspiration of the Psalms

The relationship of God with his people is expressed in the Psalms through various motifs

A. The Exodus Motif:

B. The Torah Motif:

C. Father-Child, Mother-Child Motif:

D. Shepherd - Sheep Motif:

E. King - People Motif:

F. Rock - Refuge Motif:

G. Portion - Cup Motif:

V. Psalms in the Christian Tradition

1. In the N.T.

Jesus used psalms as his prayer, and the NT writers quoted psalms extensively.

Following this tradition, the fathers of the Church like Ambrose, Augustine, John Chrysostom and others have esteemed the Psalms.

2. The Divine Office (VAT II SC 83)

Church teaches that in praising God by singing psalms along with the Lord we intercede for the salvation of the humanity (SC).

VI. Psalms Hard to understand

1. Psalms Hard to Interpret

We do not commonly use Psalms such as Ps 59, 83 and 109 in the liturgical celebrations. The psalmist in the midst of suffering cries out for vengeance.

2. Themes Hard to Interpret

A. Curses in the Psalms

In many Psalms we find curses against individuals and the groups. They are found both in the Individual Lament (Ps 35; 59; 69; 109; 140) and the Communal Lament (Ps 12; 28; 83; 137:8-9). They are called Cursing Psalms.

How to interpret curses in the Psalms?

VII. Praying the Psalms

Psalms are the Prayer Book of the Bible. An effective method of praying the Psalms is the use of 3 Rs, namely:

1. Reading or Situating the Psalm.
2. Reflecting or Christifying and Christianising the Psalm.
3. Reacting or actualizing the Psalm.

VIII. Conclusion

Prayer without action is dead. A devout praying of the Psalms must lead one to live the Psalms. In this sense, the various groups of Psalms challenge the ‘prayer’ into action.

- 1. Ecological Challenges**
- 2. Sociological Challenges**
- 3. Psychological Challenges**
- 4. Indian Challenges**