Psalms
Scripture: Psalm
Code: MSB19

Title

The entire collection of Psalms is entitled “Praises” in the Hebrew text. Later, rabbis often designated it “The Book of Praises.” The Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the OT, labeled it “Psalms” (cf. “The book of Psalms” in the NT: Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20). The Greek verb from which the noun “psalms” comes basically denotes the “plucking or twanging of strings,” so that an association with musical accompaniment is implied. The English title derives from the Greek term and its background. The Psalms constituted Israel’s ancient, God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16) “hymnbook,” which defined the proper spirit and content of worship.

There are 116 psalms that have superscriptions or “titles.” The Hebrew text includes these titles with the verses themselves. When the titles are surveyed individually and studied as a general phenomenon, there are significant indications that they were appended to their respective psalms shortly after composition and that they contain reliable information (cf. Luke 20:42).

These titles convey various kinds of information such as authorship, dedication, historical occasion, liturgical assignment to a worship director, liturgical instructions (e.g., what kind of song it is, whether it is to have a musical accompaniment, and what tune to use), plus other technical instructions of uncertain meaning due to their great antiquity. One very tiny, attached Hebrew preposition shows up in the majority of the Psalm titles. It may convey different relationships, e.g., “of,” “from,” “by,” “to,” “for,” “in reference to,” “about.” Sometimes it occurs more than once, even in short headings, usually supplying “of,” or “by,” person X … “to,” or “for,” person Y information. However, this little preposition most frequently indicates the authorship of a psalm, whether “of” David, the accomplished psalmist of Israel, or “by” Moses, Solomon, Asaph, or the sons of Korah.

Authorship and Date

From the divine perspective, the Psalter points to God as its author. Approaching authorship from the human side one can identify a collection of more than 7 composers. King David wrote at least 75 of the 150 psalms; the sons of Korah accounted for 10 (Pss. 42, 44–49,84, 85, 87); and Asaph contributed 12 (Pss. 50, 73–83). Other penmen included Solomon (Pss. 72, 127), Moses (Ps. 90), Heman (Ps. 88), and Ethan (Ps. 89). The remaining 48 psalms remain anonymous in their authorship, although Ezra is thought to be the author of some. The time range of the Psalms extends from

Moses, ca. 1410 B.C. (Ps. 90), to the late sixth or early fifth century B.C. post-Exilic period (Ps. 126), which spans about 900 years of Jewish history.

Background and Setting

The backdrop for the Psalms is twofold: 1) the acts of God in creation and history, and 2) the history of Israel. Historically, the psalms range in time from the origin of life to the post-Exilic joys of the Jews liberated from Babylon. Thematically, the psalms cover a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from heavenly worship to earthly war. The collected psalms comprise the largest book in the Bible and the most frequently quoted OT book in the NT. Psalm 117 represents the middle chapter (out of 1,189) in the Bible. Psalm 119 is the largest chapter in the entire Bible. Through the ages, the psalms have retained their original primary purpose, i.e., to engender the proper praise and worship of God.

Historical and Theological Themes

The basic theme of Psalms is living real life in the real world, where two dimensions operate simultaneously: 1) a horizontal or temporal reality, and 2) a vertical or transcendent reality. Without denying the pain of the earthly dimension, the people of God are to live joyfully and dependently on the Person and promises standing behind the heavenly/eternal dimension. All cycles of human troubles and triumphs provide occasions for expressing human complaints, confidence, prayers, or praise, to Israel's sovereign Lord.

In view of this, Psalms presents a broad array of theology, practically couched in day-today reality. The sinfulness of man is documented concretely, not only through the behavioral patterns of the wicked, but also by the periodic stumblings of believers. The sovereignty of God is everywhere recognized, but not at the expense of genuine human responsibility. Life often seems to be out of control, and yet all events and situations are understood in the light of divine providence as being right on course according to God's timetable. Assuring glimpses of a future "God's day" bolsters the call for perseverance to the end. This book of praise manifests a very practical theology.

A commonly misunderstood phenomenon in Psalms is the association that often develops between the "one" (the psalmist) and the "many" (the theocratic people). Virtually all of the cases of this occur in the psalms of King David. There was an inseparable relationship between the mediatorial ruler and his people; as life went for the king, so it went for the people. Furthermore, at times this union accounted for the psalmist's apparent connection with Christ in the messianic psalms (or messianic portions of certain psalms). The so-called imprecatory (curse pronouncing) psalms may be better understood with this perspective. As God's mediatorial representative on earth, David prayed for judgment on his enemies, since these enemies were not only hurting him, but were primarily hurting God's people. Ultimately, they challenged the King of Kings, the God of Israel.

Interpretive Challenges

It is helpful to recognize certain recurring genres or literary types in the Psalter. Some of the most obvious are: 1) the wisdom type with instructions for right living; 2) lamentation patterns which deal with the pangs of life (usually arising from enemies without); 3) penitential psalms (mostly dealing with the “enemy” within, i.e., sin); 4) kingship emphases (universal or mediatorial; theocratic and/or messianic rule); and 5) thanksgiving psalms. A combination of style and subject matter help to identify such types when they appear.

The comprehensive literary characteristic of the psalms is that all of them are poetry par excellence. Unlike most English poetry, which is based on rhyme and meter, Hebrew poetry is essentially characterized by logical parallelisms. Some of the most important kinds of parallelisms are: 1) synonymous (the thought of the first line is restated with similar concepts in the second line, e.g., Ps. 2:1); 2) antithetic (the thought of the second line is contrasted with the first, e.g., Ps. 1:6); 3) climactic (the second and any subsequent lines pick up a crucial word, phrase, or concept and advance it in a stair-step fashion, e.g., Ps. 29:1, 2); and 4) chiastic or introverted (the logical units are developed in an A … B…B’ … A’ … pattern, e.g., Ps. 1:2).

On a larger scale, some psalms in their development from the first to the last verse employ an acrostic or alphabetical arrangement. Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145 are recognized as either complete or incomplete acrostics. In the Hebrew text, the first letter of the first word of every verse begins with a different Hebrew consonant, which advances in alphabetical order until the 22 consonants are exhausted. Such a literary vehicle undoubtedly aided in the memorization of the content and served to indicate that its particular subject matter had been covered from “A to Z.” Psalm 119 stands out as the most complete example of this device, since the first letter of each of its 22, 8-verse stanzas moves completely through the Hebrew alphabet.

Outline

The 150 canonical psalms were organized quite early into 5 “books.” Each of these books ends with a doxology (Pss. 41:13; 72:18–20; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6). Jewish tradition appealed to the number 5 and alleged that these divisions echoed the Pentateuch, i.e., the 5 books of Moses. It is true that there are clusters of psalms, such as 1) those drawn together by an association with an individual or group (e.g., “The sons of Korah,” Pss. 42–49; Asaph, Pss. 73–83), 2) those dedicated to a particular function (e.g., “Songs of ascents,” Pss. 120–134), or 3)
those devoted explicitly to praise worship (Pss. 146–150). But no one configuration key unlocks the “mystery” as to the organizing theme of this 5-book arrangement. Thus, there is no identifiable thematic structure to the entire collection of psalms.

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