

Intro to the Hebrew Bible
Psalms Overview Lecture
By: Dr. Lisa W. Davison

The name of this collection of prayers, "Psalms", comes from the Septuagint's (LXX) Greek title, *psalmoi*, suggesting songs sung with musical instruments for accompaniment. In the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew title is *tehillim*, meaning "praises". As we will see, this concept that all prayer was a way of praising God is key to understanding the Psalms. Even angry laments are a means of praising the Divine, but I will say more about that in another lecture.

The Psalter is often referred to as the "hymnbook of the second Temple", reflecting the belief that the Book of Psalms got its final shape in the period of rebuilding the Temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel (circa 520-515 BCE). However, we are basically ignorant about the date of composition for most of these psalms (except maybe Ps 137, which could not have been written prior to the Babylonian exile, circa 586 BCE). It is possible that some were actually composed in the pre-exilic period of David & Solomon (10th century) or even earlier. In fact, some of these prayers are probably very ancient.

The Psalter is unique among the books of the Hebrew Bible because it is the only one that contains nothing but prayers. While other books contain prayers, they are usually set within the context of a narrative. The Psalms is a collection of prayers that must stand on their own, without any supporting story. We see examples of psalms being reused (used for the first time) in other parts of the HB, as in the parallel between 2 Sam 22 & Ps 18.

The Book of Psalms is the most frequently encountered biblical text among the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls and fragments of scrolls reveal that the communities behind the texts knew of most of the 150 canonical psalms, but we also find other psalms that

were not ultimately canonized. These are intermingled with the canonical psalms, and the order varies. This implies that the fixed order, editing, of the Psalter was still in flux as late as the 1st or 2nd centuries CE.

The Psalms is of great importance for the church because of its influence on hymns, theology, worship, understandings of God, & prayer. Obviously, some shape of the Psalter was known and important for Jesus & his followers, as it was for the early Christian community. The Psalms also provides a rich resource of prayer and worship materials for today. It reflects the gamut of human emotions and experiences.

It is important to say a word about the numbering of these prayers. In the LXX, there is an extra psalm, 151. It is connected to the combat between David & Goliath, but the prayer describes itself as being "outside the number of 150." The received collections of the LXX and Hebrew texts contain only 150 psalms, but the numbering is different. The LXX combines Pss 9 & 10 to create Ps 9, and it combines Pss 114 & 115 as Ps 113. Ps 116:1-9 in Masoretic Text (MT) is the LXX Ps 114, and Ps 116:10-19 in the MT is Ps 115 in the LXX. Then, the LXX divides Ps 147 in the MT into 146 & 147. Thus, in the LXX all psalms from 10-147 are one number lower than their MT counterparts. The Vulgate used the LXX numbering, thus it was in use for Catholic bibles. Jewish and Protestant bibles used the MT numbering. This is important to know when reading commentaries on a psalm; you need to know which numbering system the author is using. For example, when I took a class on the LXX at Vanderbilt, I wrote my paper on Ps 119, but it was actually Ps 118 in the LXX.

Another minor, but important, piece of information regards verse numbering. The problem is what to do with superscriptions (the information that comes before the prayer, see next section on Superscriptions). Sometimes in the MT, these are rendered as one or two verses. Ex: Ps 51, MT numbers the first verse of the psalm proper as v 3 "Have Mercy on me, O God", which is the v 1 in a Christian translation, like the NRSV.

This is the practice followed by Jewish translations as well as early Roman Catholic translations.

Superscriptions

All but 34 of the psalms are titled with superscriptions. These titles, though, yield little historically reliable information. Despite the difficulty in fully understanding them, the titles seem to represent an effort to classify these psalms by those who assembled and edited them. There are three types of information included in the superscriptions: proper names associated with the psalm, musical/liturgical notes, and literary genre of the psalm.

Proper Names: There are 73 psalms with the superscription containing "*ledavid*", which could mean "of David, for David, or to David", as in dedicated to or in honor of David. These should not be taken as byline of authorship. Other names included in the superscriptions include: Moses (Ps 90), Solomon (Pss 72 & 127), Jeduthun (Ps 39), Heman (Ps 88), and Ethan (Ps 89). 12 psalms are attributed to Korah and 12 to Asaph. Overtime, these psalms somehow came to be connected to these people, probably during the collection process. David was remembered as the initiator of psalmody in worship acc to 1 Chr 16:7-43. This could account for the association of many psalms with his name. Also, through interpretive process, we see how some psalms could have been associated with events in his life. In addition, some of the other name (Jeduthun, Heman, Korah) are related to David's establishing of worship.

Liturgical Instructions: 55 psalms contain phrase "to the leader", which was probably some type of liturgical instruction. We do not know its precise meaning today. Other words and phrases appear that we also do not know their significance, but more than likely they indicated moods, modes or melodies to accompany the singing of certain psalms. For example, the Hebrew *gittith* is found in Pss 8 & 81; *sheminith* in Pss 6&12, "the Deer of the Dawn" in Ps 22, *shoshannim* in Pss 45 & 69, and word, "lilies", in others. They may even indicate musical instruments to be used or the worship context

in which this psalm was to be used. In a related note, the word *selah*, which occurs at points in some psalms, is a mystery to HB scholars. Some have suggested this means a "rest" or "breath" in the psalm, but that is an educated guess. Please, though, when you are reading aloud one of the psalms in worship, do NOT read the word "selah".

Genre Designations: Do not think of these in modern literary criticism terms. Most frequently we find the word, *mizmor* (a psalm or a song). Also have *tehillim* (praises) and *sir* (song). These are also mostly unclear to scholars today.

Most scholars ignore the superscriptions.