

## Unit 2 Introduction

# Types and Original Uses of Psalms

The book of Psalms is a collection of Israel's sacred hymns, compiled and edited over a long period of time, most likely from the 10th century until the 2nd century BC. The Hebrew title of the book (*tehillim* means "praises") indicates the praise character of the content of this book. These hymns were part of the Jewish worship both in the temple that Solomon built and the temple that was rebuilt by those who returned from their exile in Babylon. We do not know the precise order of liturgy that was followed in the temple services. In the book itself, we find reference to the liturgical usage of certain psalms on special sacred days or events (see Psalms 30; 38; 70; 92; 100).

The editorial statements (superscription) found in all but 34 psalms include a reference to the literary type in most of the psalms. Song (Hebrew terms: *sir* or *mizmor*) is the most common designation for most of the psalms (87 times). Thirteen psalms are called didactic songs (*maskil*). Other types include golden poem (*miktam*; 6 times), prayer (*tephilla*; 5 times), penitential song (*shiggayon*; 1 time); praise (*tehillah*; 1 time). Modern scholars differ in their classification of the psalms. Some prefer to see praise and laments as the two major types of psalms. Others expand the list to hymns, laments, thanksgiving psalms, psalms of trust and confidence, royal psalms, wisdom psalms, liturgical psalms, and historical psalms. We follow here the expanded list of various types of psalms.

### Hymns of Praise

Hymns of praise make up about one-fifth of the book of Psalms. As the title indicates, the primary goal of this type of psalm is to praise God, sometimes for no specific reason (Psalms 8; 29; 33; 100; etc.), sometimes for His universal reign (Psalms 47; 93; 96; 97; 98; 99), and sometimes for choosing Zion/Jerusalem as His earthly dwelling place and thus making it the symbol of strength and security for Israel (Psalms 46; 48; 76; etc.). These psalms obviously belonged to the temple worship. Hymns that show no specific reasons for praise may have been used at any context of worship, particularly at festival times. Some scholars speculate that Israel celebrated God's kingship along with the New Year festivities. This may have been the setting of the hymns that celebrate God's universal reign. Pilgrimage to Zion/Jerusalem by the faithful may have been the setting of hymns that celebrate the greatness of Zion.

### Psalms of Lament

There are over 50 psalms that may be classified as laments in the book of Psalms. These psalms are prayers that express the

anguish, bitterness, anger, pain, disappointment, and frustration of the Israelite community of faith. Some of these laments are *laments of individuals*; some others are *laments of the worshiping community* as a whole. The original use of these psalms may have been in the context of private or public worship in the temple.

Laments in the Psalms most likely originated in some particular crisis situations in the life of the individual or the community. Individual laments indicate four probable occasions of laments. Psalms, such as 6, 13, 31, 38, 39, 88, and 102, are examples of the *lament of the sick and dying person*. The worshiper's claim of innocence and appeal to God for his righteous judgment is a characteristic found in the *laments of the accused* (see 7:3-5; 17:3-5; 26:4-7). In the *laments of the oppressed*, we find the psalmist crying out for deliverance and God's judgment of the oppressor or the enemy (see 10; 22; 35). Psalm 51 is an excellent example of the *lament of the penitent*. In this psalm, the psalmist confesses sin and pleads with God for his mercy, forgiveness, and cleansing.

Community laments mostly come from the context of national crisis and calamities. Psalm 12 expresses the community's anguish over the lack of godly people in the society. Defeat by the enemy is the context of the community laments in Psalms 60, and 74. Psalm 85 is a lament over the sinfulness of the worshiping community. The community's exile is the context of the lament in Psalm 137. We find in all these community laments Israel following the instruction given in 2 Chronicles 7:11-14.

### Thanksgiving Psalms

Psalms that begin with the call to give thanks (Psalms 105-107) or where thanksgiving receives a major emphasis (see Psalms 9; 30; 66; 92; 116; 118; 138) may be labeled as thanksgiving psalms. The original use of these psalms may have been an answer to prayer or God's deliverance of an individual or the worshiping community. These psalms usually contain some reference to the crisis from which God delivered the psalmist or the worshiping community. Some thanksgiving psalms seem to indicate their use in the psalmist's fulfillment of the vow that he had made when he appealed for God's help. Fulfillment of such vows was usually done in the setting of the temple worship, usually accompanied by an offering or sacrifice.

### Psalms of Trust and Confidence

A number of psalms express the psalmist's and the worshiping community's trust and confidence in God as their source of hope and strength in the midst of their trouble-filled existence. Psalm 23 is

an excellent example of such psalms. The language of trust and confidence dominates such psalms (see for example, Psalms 3; 4; 11; 16; 115; 125). Though we cannot establish a specific occasion for the use of these psalms, they were most likely a part of Israel's temple worship. The psalmist declaration of trust may have functioned as a testimony and encouragement to the worshipping community.

### Royal Psalms

A number of psalms focus on the Davidic king who rules the nation of Israel as God's appointed ruler (see 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 101; 110; 144). Scholars designate these psalms as Royal Psalms. Royal Psalms originated out of Israel's belief in God's covenant with David (see 2 Samuel 7:12-16). Royal Psalms remember and reflect on God's covenant promises to David. In these psalms, the Davidic king is referred to as "the anointed one" (Hebrew *mashiach*; see 2:2), which is a clue to the proper identification of this type of psalms.

The language of the royal psalms helps us to determine the original use of most of these psalms. Some of these psalms may have been used during the time of *coronation* (see Psalms 2, 21, 72, 101, and 110). Psalm 72 contains the prayer of the nation on behalf of the king on the day of coronation. It is likely that Psalm 101 is an oath taken by the king on the day of his coronation to faithfully carry out the duties as God's appointed ruler over His people. Psalm 110 is for the most part in the form of God's speech to the king on the day of coronation.

Psalm 20 follows the pattern of a *service of prayer* for the king before he departed for battle. The temple worship may have been the setting of this liturgy. Psalms 18 and 21 reflect the language of *royal thanksgiving*. It is likely that these psalms were used in the context of worship and praise after the king's victory over his enemies. The context of *royal wedding* was the occasion for Psalm 45. Here we find elaborate praise of the king-bridegroom as the anointed ruler of God's people. It is likely that Psalm 144 is a *royal lament*—an appeal for help and rescue by a king who was being threatened by his enemies. Again, the setting was most likely the context of worship in the temple.

The early Christian church interpreted the royal psalms in light of the ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus (see Matthew 22:44; Acts 2:34; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Hebrews 1:13). These psalms have thus become for the church "messianic psalms" because the church found in these psalms the Old Testament portrait of Jesus the Messiah.

### Wisdom Psalms

Israel's wisdom teachers (the Wise or the Sage) believed that wisdom to live a meaningful life is found in the law or the instructions (*torah*) that God gave to Israel. In the book of Psalms we find a number of psalms that focus on the *torah* and its central place in the life of the worshipping community. Scholars give these psalms

various labels, such as Didactic Psalms, Psalms of Instruction, Torah Psalms, and Wisdom Psalms. Psalms 1, 19, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, and 133 are example of this type of psalms. The context of the original use of the wisdom psalms is not clear. Since the book of Psalms is connected to Israel's worship, some scholars think that these psalms functioned as part of the liturgy in the temple. It is also possible that these psalms were used in the educational institutions in ancient Israel to challenge the students to live by God's instructions. One scholar speculates that wisdom psalms were regularly recited in the synagogues by those who faithfully kept the *torah*.

### Liturgical Psalms

Psalms 15 and 24 are sometimes called liturgical psalms because the language of these psalms reflects the entrance requirements one must meet in order to enter the temple precinct to worship God. It is possible that these psalms were sung by the Levitical singers at the entrance of the temple as worshipers made their way into the temple court. Some scholars see in Psalm 24 the reflection of an ancient custom of proclaiming God's kingship over the whole world. It is likely that verses 7-10 were part of the liturgy used in the procession of the worshipers through the streets of Jerusalem led by the ark of the covenant, symbolically representing God's presence and His kingship.

### Historical Psalms

Historical psalms (see 78; 105) are recitals of God's mighty and redemptive acts in Israel's history. The great festival times, such as the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles, may have been the context of the use of these psalms. These psalms show that recalling God's faithfulness in the past was an essential part of Israel's worship.

### Songs of Ascent

We add to the modern list of various types of psalms, Songs of Ascent, or Pilgrim Psalms, a literary type found within the book itself (see Psalms 120—134). Each of the psalms in this collection bears the title "A Song of Ascents." The nouns "ascents" (Hebrew *ma'alah*) comes from a verb that means "to go up." Going to Jerusalem was in a sense "going up" to the mountain of God—Mount Zion, the dwelling place of God. The noun "ascents" also means "steps." It is possible that this may also refer to the steps of the temple or steps to the City of David (Jerusalem). In ancient Israel pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a divine command. It is very likely that these were psalms used by the pilgrims of ancient Israel as they made their way to Jerusalem. Some of the Songs of Ascent reflect their particular use by the pilgrims.

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