

Psalms

Summary

What if someone asked you to write down the words to your family's favorite songs, including the songs that are sung on special occasions? You would have your own family songbook that would cover a huge range of topics. And what if you did that for your entire nation for many generations? That would produce an enormous songbook of your people. Psalms is the songbook of the Jewish people.

The word "psalm" is the Greek word for song. The book of Psalms is the longest book of the Bible. It contains lyrics for 150 separate songs that were written and compiled by multiple songwriters over a thousand-year period. Each song that is represented is a separate chapter. Although we do not know each individual melody, there is general agreement that the book of Psalms was used as a temple or tabernacle hymn book and devotional guide for the Jewish people. Many of these songs were meant to be accompanied by musical instruments, perhaps a harp or lute. At the beginning of many of the psalms, instructions to the music director were included as to suggest how certain musical instruments or rhythms should accompany the song. The subject matter covered in Psalms is quite diverse, but in general, the theme of these 150 songs is the worship of God.

The book of Psalms is challenging to summarize; there have been many attempts to group individual psalms into broad categories. However, Psalms is so complex that this task becomes quickly unwieldy. One method of classification (seen in the NIV) divides the chapters into five sections or books, each referring to one of the first five books of the Bible (also called the Pentateuch).

Book 1 (Genesis) Psalms 1-41

Book 2 (Exodus) Psalms 42-72

Book 3 (Leviticus) Psalms 73-89

Book 4 (Numbers) Psalms 90-106

Book 5 (Deuteronomy) Psalms 107-150

Psalms is the most quoted book in the New Testament, and it is still widely quoted today.

Author

There are multiple composers, or writers, of the book of Psalms. Some of the composers are known, but the authorship of some of the psalms has been lost or is unclear. There is still much debate over several of the psalms, but below are the approximate numbers of psalms along with their originators:

David is identified as the composer of about half of the psalms. "Davidic Psalms"

Asaph, a priest who headed the service of music, wrote twelve of the psalms.

The sons of Korah, a music guild, wrote ten of the psalms.

Solomon wrote two of the psalms.

Moses, Heman, and Ethan each wrote one of the psalms.

The remaining fifty psalms are anonymous.

Date

Biblical scholars estimate that the book of Psalms was written and compiled over a thousand-year period. This timeframe is believed to be from the time of Moses (c. 1410 B.C.), until after the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon (430 B.C.).

Primary Characters

God, predominantly referred to as Jehovah (Lord), in Books 1, 4 and 5; as El or Elohim (God) in Books 2 and 3 (Various Psalms)

David, the son of Jesse, the father of Solomon, and the king of Israel (Various Psalms)

Historical Moments

Psalms covers about a thousand years of Jewish history, from the time of Moses until after the Israelites return from exile and the temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt. We know the setting of some of the psalms, such as David's life, but there is much unknown about the setting of many of the psalms.

Major Theological Themes

The Attributes of God are Numerous and Diverse - God is just, righteous, and worthy to be praised. We are created to give Him praise. God will protect and save us, and He will provide for all our needs, both physical and spiritual. God is omnipotent, and He has the power to

protect us from our enemies. God knows us intimately, and He loves us more than we can fathom. God is eternal, and He existed before creation. Finally, God's mercy covers us, and He provides comfort at all times.

Lessons Learned from Psalms

Psalms are Used for Worship, Lament, Thanksgiving, and Much More - The subject matter covered in Psalms is quite diverse, but in general, the theme of these 150 songs is the worship of God. The book of Psalms is often divided into five sections, each one roughly corresponding to the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch). Some of the songs were laments in which individuals or groups were crying out to God for help. Some psalms are songs of thanksgiving in which an individual or from a group were praising Him. Other songs are called "ascents" which were written specifically for the Jewish people to sing as they walked up to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Other songs are "Pilgrim Songs" which would be sung on a journey, or pilgrimage, to pass the time, and to help the people focus their thoughts on God. Some songs or psalms have multiple stanzas or refrains; nine of the Psalms use the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet ("Aleph to Tav" or as we would say, A to Z) for each of the verses.