

## **The Psalms in the Worship of the Church**

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### **Part 2: The Book of Psalms: God’s Rule for Singing in the Church**

#### **A. Development of the Canon of Praise (pp. 7 – 10)**

The title of the book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible is “Sepher Tehillim,” “Book of Praises.” It is made up of five “books” (Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150), each of which closes with a doxology of praise.

By the time of Christ, the Psalms were a settled collection known as “The Book of Psalms,” which was recognized by Jesus and the apostles:

Luke 20:41-42

Acts 1:20

Acts 13:33

#### **1. Who wrote the Psalms?**

<u>Author</u>	<u># of Psalms</u>	<u>Example</u>
David	73	Psalm 40
Asaph (Levite)	12	Psalm 81
Sons of Korah (Levites)	11	Psalm 49
Solomon	2	Psalm 72
Moses	1	Psalm 90
Heman (Levite)	1	Psalm 88
Ethan (Levite)	1	Psalm 89
Unknown	50	Psalm 146

#### **2. When were they collected?**

We do not know exactly when the collecting of the psalms was complete, but it was certainly after the return from exile.

There is a good possibility that Books 1-3 were assembled before the exile. King Hezekiah commanded that the psalms of David and Asaph be sung by the Levites in the worship of the Temple (2 Chronicles 29 : 30). Since the

majority of David's psalms (57) are in Books 1 and 2 and all of Asaph's (12) are in Books 2 and 3, it is possible if not likely that Books 1-3 were a recognized collection by Hezekiah's time. The last verse of Book 2 (Psalm 72:20) appears to describe the completion of a collection of David's psalms, albeit a preliminary completion.

Book 5 was clearly assembled after the Babylonian Exile, since it contains a psalm written during the Exile (Psalm 137) and a psalm rejoicing in the return from the Exile (Psalm 126).

### **3. For what purpose(s) were the Psalms composed and collected?**

#### **a. Composition of the Psalms**

There are many kinds of psalms and it is not always easy to discern the initial purpose for which a given psalm was composed. One way of classifying psalms as to their nature and purpose is to look at the verbs in the psalms.

Many of the psalms are first person (singular) compositions addressed directly to God – **personal expressions of praise, and cries for help, forgiveness or vindication** in some particular situation (sometimes the situation is described in the title). Most of David's psalms are first person singular. Example: Psalm 13 --“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?...I will sing to the LORD because He has dealt bountifully with me”

Other psalms are **corporate expressions of praise, and cries for help, forgiveness or vindication**. Generally, the occasion of such compositions is not given. Some of them may have been composed for the Temple worship. Example: Psalm 80 – “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel...Restore us, O God; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved!”

Other psalms are **calls to God's people to praise Him** – the verbs are mostly in the imperative. Generally, the occasion of such compositions is not given, but it seems likely that many were composed for the worship at the Temple. Example: Psalm 96 – “Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!”

#### **b. Collection of the Psalms**

Although composed in differing times and situations, the most likely reason that the psalms began to be gathered appears to have been for **the singing of**

**praise in the Temple worship** (see 2 Chronicles 29).

52 of the 89 psalms of Books 1-3 are specifically titled “To the Chief Musician.” All 11 of the psalms of the Sons of Korah (Levites who served at the Temple) are found in Books 1-3. Both first person singular (e.g. Psalm 13) and first person plural psalms (e.g. Psalm 80) are designated “To the Chief Musician”.

The Levites, at the command of David, sang psalms as part of their appointed duties (before the ark of God and later at the Temple) – see 1 Chronicles 15:16-16:36.

16:7 – “On that day David first delivered [this psalm] into the hand of Asaph and his brethren, to thank the LORD...”

The song which follows is made up of parts of three psalms found in Book 4 of the psalter:

vv 8-22 are Psalm 105:1-15

vv 23-33 are Psalm 96:1-13

vv 34-36 are Psalm 106:1, 47-48 (the closing psalm of Book 4).

By the time Book 5 was completed after the Exile, the singing of the psalms in the Temple worship was already well-established (see Nehemiah 12:24). Psalms 120-134 are designated “Songs of Ascents” – psalms sung by pilgrims going up to the required feasts at the Temple – but it is quite possible that these psalms also were sung in the Temple worship itself.

#### **4. What further light does the New Testament shine on the purpose(s) of the Book of Psalms?**

“The Psalms certainly gained power and effect by being gathered into a collection of songs that were used regularly in the praise of the temple. The accumulated weight of their great themes, especially the Lord’s Kingship and his Covenant, shaped the hope of Israel. With longing, Israel looked to the coming King and the fulfillment of the covenant promises. The anticipatory energy awaiting the appearance of the One portrayed in the types and shadows of earthly priests and kings fills the Psalms. When Christ came, the Psalms’ full meaning appeared: they could be sung by God’s people to praise Messiah, fulfiller of the covenant promises.

....When Christ appeared, the great truths of the Psalms shone forth, and their power as songs of praise was multiplied. The intrinsic design of the

Book of Psalms to be the Church's book of praise, inspired and collected under the direction of the Holy Spirit over many centuries, became plain and the Church could sing these praise with full understanding." (pp. 8-9)

## **5. Implications for the Church's worship**

The Psalms – inspired, collected and designated for praise --- have been given to the Church **to be sung** in God's worship today!

The Church should not fret that God has given no New Testament canon of praise like the Book of Psalms. God has given a rich Book of Praises which has become even richer and fuller in the NT age because we can begin to fathom the depth of their Messianic content. Christians need to beware of the very human tendency to "fix" what they aren't comfortable with or don't understand in Scripture e.g. by writing songs for God's worship to substitute for the absent NT canon of praise.

## **6. Should other songs in the Scripture be sung in the worship of the Church?**

The Psalms have been identified by God for the praise of the Church by being collected and named a "Book of Praises" – they possess manifest warrant for the worship of the Church. Other songs in Scripture appear within a variety of Scripture contexts (narrative, prophecy, law) which do not give such clear indication of divine intent that they be sung in public worship. e.g. The Holy Spirit has included Hannah's prayer song in 1 Samuel 2 in the narrative of the birth and calling of Samuel, but her song has not been clearly identified for singing in the worship of the Church. By contrast, David's song in 2 Samuel 22, composed in thankfulness for his deliverance from Saul, has been identified by the Holy Spirit for singing in the worship of the Church by being included (as Psalm 18) in the canonical Book of Praises (p. 10).

