

## Introduction to the Psalms

### Resources

- The Psalms – read them!
- The rest of the Bible (as it quotes and uses the Psalms)!
- Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* and *Psalms 73-150* (two volumes in the Tyndale OT commentaries series)
- Paul Tripp, *Whiter than snow: meditations on sin and mercy* (lovely book on Psalm 51)
- Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight: heartbeat of the word of God* (lovely book on Psalm 119)
- Alec Motyer, *Journey: psalms for pilgrim people* (lovely book on the Psalms of Ascent)
- C.H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David* (online at <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/treasury.htm>)
- Tremper Longman III, *How to read the Psalms*
- Geoffrey Grogan, *Prayer, praise and prophecy: a theology of the psalms* (NB. Not a commentary, but a thematic survey and theology of the psalter)
- John Woodhouse, *The Psalms in the Bible, The Psalms and the Christ, The Psalms and the Gospel* (three talks introducing the psalms, online at <http://www.proctrust.org.uk/product/instruction-on-series/instruction-on-psalms-david-and-christ-597>)
- Andrew Sach, Nigel Beynon, *Dig Deeper*, (pages 62-66 on parallelism)
- Thomas Renz, *Unpublished lectures on the psalms* (my old OT lecturer at Oak Hill)

### The following = introductory notes on...

- **What IS the book of Psalms? And how does it “work”?**
- **Some suggestions for how to read the psalms**
- **Were the Psalms arranged or edited into in a particular order?**
- **Psalms 1 & 2: links between them, and as a combined introduction to the whole psalter**

## **What IS the book of Psalms? And how does it “work”?**

### **1. How do the Psalms “work”? Their function reflects three stages in the development of the psalter<sup>1</sup>:**

- Stage 1 – **individual experience** of the psalmists.  
Such psalms may be viewed as separate entities, but *furnished a book of prayers which others might appropriate for their own use.*
- Stage 2 – then pss became a **book for worship**.  
Pss gathered together over time. Used throughout for corporate worship in the house of God. NT use shows it can still be employed today in *corporate worship*.
- Stage 3 – with its introductory pss1&2 it became a **book for godly reflection**.  
More didactic? / a teaching function as a whole book.  
Testifies to faithfulness of God – as experienced in pss, and believed in for the future.  
Becomes a whole bk which presents a search which finds its goal at the end, like Job or Ecclesiastes.  
Is a bk for obedience, with Ps1 at beginning – this is its canonical purpose.

i.e. we can see 3 stages in development of psalter. Each builds on, and does not alter the previous.  
And each will be reflected in our use of psalms. i.e...

- will help the Xn re: personal experience – may give words to Xn’s experience, give us words to pray or praise.
- be a manual for corporate worship in a healthy Church.
- teach us and call to reflection and obedience, at both individual and corporate level.

### **2. The Psalter TEACHES US: it is important for Christian UNDERSTANDING**

- The Psalms’ great themes, especially GOD HIMSELF
  - God... creation... especially Israel’s history (the covenant promises, exodus, wanderings, conquest, etc)... David the Messianic king (his rule, character, enemies, identification with God himself)
- NB. The addition of Ps1 with its instructions re: the Law show we are to *reflect* on Psalter as a whole for the sake of our understanding.

### **3. The Psalter helps us FEEL: it is important for Christian EXPERIENCE:**

- **The pss do not only reflect the godly experience of those we meet in the psalms, they actually create it within us (Grogan)**
  - **We learn what we’re truly like before God.** – examine ourselves in light of pss, and situations of sin, suffering, persecution, blessing.
  - **We learn what it means to pray and how to pray.** – how to respond to each of these situations in prayer. Gives us words to use. Eg. scripture tells us to give thanks – but the Psalms shows us how. So...

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<sup>1</sup> See Grogan pp293ff

#### **4. The psalms as a PRAYER BOOK: but WHO prays the psalms?**

##### **(a) Israel's prayerbook: function in worship of OT Israel**

- As a ready made prayer bk for all of life's troubles.
- Temple, cultic setting: evidence from Psalms themselves: eg. language of ascending hill of Lord, coming to house/temple of God, fulfilling vows etc. [eg. Pss 5, 34, 66].
- See some evidence of use of psalms from historical books – esp Hannah and Jonah in 1 Sam 2 and Jonah 2 = Praise to God for answered prayer (like Ps113), and thanks for rescue, respectively.
- Esp as *covenantal* prayerbk. See in...
  - **Zion** – place of temple, symbol of God's presence with people etc. Frequently praised in psalms. Eg. 48, 122.
  - **The history of Israel** – God's past actions frequently recalled. Eg. 98, 77; some have as main aim recalling God's historical works. (Pss 78, 105, 106, 136).
  - **The Law** – eg. Pss 1, 19, 119.
  - **Kingship** – [p230] king stands behind covenant, and kingship a big theme
    - **God is king**, pss 47, 93, 95-99
    - **Human king**, pss 2, 20, 21, 3, - ps2 reveals rel betw divine and human king.
  - **Warfare** – biblical concept of holy war may lie behind some pss, which may be sung before, during or after battle – eg. ps 7, 91, 98

##### **(b) David's prayerbook (i.e. the prayerbook of the Messiah)**

See Mk 12:35ff, Acts 1:16, 2:25ff, 2:34-35, 4:25-26.

##### **(c) Jesus' prayerbook**

Mk 14:26 – see Jesus joining in with the liturgy of the day.

##### **(d) Church's prayerbook**

Acts 4:24ff, Col 3:16, Eph 5:17ff.

## Some suggestions for how to read the psalms<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Who is the SPEAKER?

Is it the Christ? Or is the Christ addressed?

### 2. What is the SITUATION?

What situation is presupposed in the psalm? Do we know?

### 3. What is the GENRE of the psalm?

Make a decision about the genre – but be flexible.

- **Lament**

Identify the object of complaint: is the psalmist focusing on himself, his enemies or God?

Is it an individual lament (eg. Ps 3) or communal (eg. Ps 44)?

The usual movement is from complaint to praise, mirroring the shape of the whole psalter.

Structure often involves:

- invocation,
- plea,
- complaint,
- expression of confidence,
- confession of sin or assertion of innocence,
- imprecation,
- hymn or blessing.

- **Thanksgiving**

A declarative psalm of praise (eg. Ps 18) .

See to understand the prayer (usually a lament) which has now been answered.

Structure often involves:

- invitation/Intention to praise God.
- introductory summary of praise
- account of past distress
- account of deliverance
- renewed vow of praise and conclusion.

- **Hymn:**

A descriptive psalm of praise (eg. 24)

Look for “for” or “because,” giving reasons for praise.

Structure often involves:

- Call to praise
- Reason for praise
- Call to praise, often repeated.

Remember: be flexible about genre – they aren’t set in stone.

Other things to keep an eye out for include:

- Psalms of confidence: what threatens the psalmist’s well-being? And what images of God are used to communicate his confidence in God in the face of trouble?
- Psalms of remembrance: where mighty acts of God are recounted. Why are these events being recalled?
- Wisdom themes: eg. creation order, law, the righteous and the wicked.

### 4. “Big structure”: Divide up the psalm into SECTIONS. How do they RELATE TO EACH OTHER?

What are the obvious bigger divisions? (“sense units”). Look out for:

- Changes in content, grammar, literary form, or speaker.
- The concentration of keywords or repeated words in a section.
- The use of refrains or repeated statements.

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<sup>2</sup> Much of this material is taken from Tremper Longman III and the unpublished lectures of Thomas Renz.

Try to summarise each section. Consider:

- How do the sections relate to each other?
- What is the movement or flow of the psalm?
- What comes first / in the middle / last? Why?

### 5. “Small structure”: How do individual lines relate to each other? (parallelism)

Lines are grouped together (often in 2’s and 3’s).

These groups communicate “thought rhymes”, not verbal rhymes.

Divide the psalm into lines. Look at the relationship between lines for similarities and differences.

Key question: how does the 2<sup>nd</sup> (or 3<sup>rd</sup>) phrase carry forward the thought of the first?

Here are some guidelines – but don’t force them:

- Synonymous – 2<sup>nd</sup> phrase says more or less same as 1<sup>st</sup>. (eg. Ps 18:24 – righteousness).
- Antithetic – 2<sup>nd</sup> says opposite.
- Synthetic – takes up and develops thought of 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Emblematic – 1<sup>st</sup> line makes point directly; 2<sup>nd</sup> illuminates it by an image.
- Chiastic
- Staircase – adds things not in 1<sup>st</sup> colon.

### 6. Look out for the IMAGERY of the poem

Be sensitive to imagery, figures of speech, unusual expressions, repetitions

- Should we read a word or phrase literally or as an image? The latter is most likely when you *can’t* read it literally.
- What comparison is being made in the image? What’s the same... and what’s different?
- Allow images to impact you.

### 7. Is the TITLE significant?

Let title inform your reading – but don’t bend the interpretation to fit it.

### 8. Is the FIRST VERSE SIGNIFICANT?

Does the first verse set up the primary subject matter?

### 9. Examine the CONTEXT:

Do surrounding psalms impact your understanding?

### 10. How was the psalm used by OT Israel?

How was the psalm used by the people of God in the OT? Do we know? (eg. “at the dedication of the temple”, or psalms of ascent.) What difference does it make?

### 11. JESUS and the Psalm?

How does it anticipate the coming of Jesus?

How might HE have sung this psalm? How may it be sung TO Jesus? Or ABOUT Jesus?

Is it quoted or alluded to in the NT? If so, why?

How can I learn from the psalmists’ example?

### 12. What is the MAIN POINT and PURPOSE of the psalm?

What is the main theme of the poem?

What did the psalmist hope the psalm would accomplish?

What is the main point of the psalm for us?

## **Were the Psalms arranged or edited into in a particular order?**

### **1. General evidence of deliberate arrangement and editing**

(i) **Superscriptions** – seem to have been added to aid interpretation.

(ii) **Consecutive psalm groups**. eg. Korah 42-49, Asaphite 73-83, Psalms of Ascent 120-134, etc.

(iii) **End of Ps72**. Testifies to incorporation of earlier collection into Psalter. Couldn't have been part of psalm originally. Plus, Davidic psalms occur later.

(iv) **Division into five books**.

+ Each ends with similar blessing formula: 41:13, 72:18-19, 89:52, 106:48, (cf. 145:21)

+ Are *possibly* arranged so as to correspond with the bks of the Pentateuch:

Bk 1 with creation themes → Genesis, etc.

Bk 2 a bit tenuous re: Exodus. Clearly only 68.

Bk 3 Levitical authors.

Bk 4 begins with ps of Moses and ends with 2 pss on wilderness wanderings → Numbers.

Bk 5 eg. Pilgrim Feasts, are regulated in Deuteronomy.

(v) **Presence of the "Elohistic psalter"**, pss42-83, where predominant divine name is Elohim rather than Yahweh. This does cut across bk divisions. But whatever it's doing, it shows some kind of deliberate arrangement.

(vi) **Deliberate placing of individ pss**. Eg.

- Davidic 86 in midst of Korahite ones: but links, esp steadfast love theme.

- Twins like 105 + 106: both go thru same history of Israel, but 15 focuses on God, and 106 on Israel, they resonate with each other. Also the acrostics 111 and 112.

(vii) **Overall movement of the psalter: from lament to praise**

### **2. Strategic location of Davidic psalms**

(i) King is introduced at the front of the Psalter in the introductory Psalm 2, where he recites a poetic version of Davidic covenant. His presence there – along with the other main "characters" and themes of the Psalms – suggests his importance to the whole Psalter.

(ii) The importance of the Davidic king is also conveyed structurally at the "seams" of the Psalter, at the ends of books two and three, Pss72 & 89.

### **3. Progression of the Psalter to a Davidic-Messianic conclusion**

(i) **Book 1**: Psalm 2 introduces idea of Davidic covenant. And Psalm 3 and Psalm 41 (the last psalm of book one) declare Yahweh's protection of the king vs enemies.

(ii) **Book 2**: Ps 72, ending Bk 2, contains multiple petitions for the king's son.

(iii) **Book 3**: New and dark perspective appears. The concluding Psalm 89 presents covenant as in distant past and as failed.

(iv) **Book 4**: Without a king, Israel both looks back to Moses (Ps 90, and seven of the other eight refs to him) and to eternal king, Yahweh (93-99).

(v) **Book 5**: Begins by anticipating the end of the exile (106:47 answered in 107:3) and includes two groups of Davidic psalms (108-110, 138-145). With these "the redactor intends to set up David as a model in response to the concerns of the psalms that precede them" [Waltke] – ie. To the prob of the exile Israel presents David as the example and as Messianic hope.

## **Psalms 1 & 2: links between them, and as a combined introduction to the whole psalter**

### **A. What are the links between psalms 1 & 2?**

#### **1. General:**

- No superscription to ps2, unique in bk1, with exception of ps10 which belongs to ps9.
- Some mss descr ps2 as the “first psalm”. (tho 1 could be taken as “prologue”).
- Ps2 gives us some of the instruction of Ps1: esp that the Lord reigns thru his king.

#### **2. Literary links:**

- “blessed” inclusion, 1:1, 2:12.
- “meditate” 1:2 = “contemplate 2:1.
- Sitting and scoffing: 1:1, 2:4.
- “gives” fruit 1:3, same word as “gives” nations as heritage 2:8. ie. fruit = the nations.
- Wicked’s way will perish 1:6, perish in the way 2:12.

#### **3. Ps1 and Ps2 linked via common link to Joshua 1. → Jesus as righteous man and king.**

- Ps1 seems to be personal and Ps 2 international, with talk of nations etc. But both Pss have a common link to Josh 1...
  - Josh 1:8 → ps1:2. Meditate day and night on torah, leading to blessing.
  - Josh 1:5 “stand against you” → same word as “stand together” in ps2:2.
- ie. pss1&2 together envisage a righteous, Joshua-like figure given total victory in battle, meditating day and night on law, and receives fruit, which for Josh is conquest of land.
- Thus end of ps1 could run straight into ps2: “the way of the wicked will perish... so why do the nations rage?... it’s dumb!”

ie. if pss1&2 read together, suggests they are

- **talking about Christ:** he is the Joshua-like figure meditating on the law, who receives nations as fruit in ps2.

- showing **Christ as speaker in ps1:** the Joshua/David figure has responsibility to teach the law to the people. – explains why there’s such a focus in Kings on how the King is relating to God – because that explains how the nation will relate to God.

### **B. How do Psalms 1 & 2 introduce the whole Psalter?**

#### **1. Ps1 – a wisdom psalm – tells us to study the whole psalter, as Josh instructed study of Mosaic law.**

- Both 1 and 2 are *wisdom* psalms: 1 shows ways of blessedness and perdition, and 2 counsels wisdom explicitly. Their content, plus the absence of superscriptions, suggests that both have been placed at front of psalter.
- Ps1 – redactor indicates by it that whole psalter is for meditative reading.
  - V2 – delight in law of Lord.
  - Linguistic links to Josh 1:8. Just as Joshua made Mosaic law subject of study, now Psalter should be meditated on.
- Thus, #1 issue in psalter is *to walk in God’s ways, or not.*

#### **2. Ps2 – shows what refusing to walk in God’s ways looks like: rebelling against the king.**

- Rebellion against king not an arbitrary choice; is essence of not walking in God’s ways. Of, rather than using mind to meditate on torah, using mind to conspire against God.

#### **3. Themes of *ethical order* and *divine rule through the king* – these are the key facts undergirding psalter, leading to confidence in Yahweh.**

- In face of probs and uncertainties, Psalmists recall these facts: Yahweh will bless righteous and judge the wicked. And he governs the nations, and has installed Israel’s king. → great confidence to walk in God’s ways.

#### **4. Davidic emphasis of Psalms – and Yahweh’s protection of him – introduced here. Reminder of 2 Sam 7.**

- God gives backing to king, and promises to watch over way of righteous – a special concern. Esp impt given attacks on the king to which the Psalter testifies.

#### 5. Pss1&2 have special links to rest of OT and to NT

- Torah, 1:2 → Mosaic law, and indeed to whole of OT incl Psalter itself.
- Allusion to Josh 1, see above.
- → 2 Sam 7, foundation of Davidic covenant.
- → Deut 17:14-20 – the king is to meditate on law of God.
- Ps1 → Jer 17:5-8.
- Ps1 → wisdom lit, eg. Prov 2:20-22.
- → NT, eg. Sermon on Mount (benedictions about blessed life, and encouragement to build on it, and warnings), Revelation 1:3, 22:18,19.

#### 6. Book 1 of the Psalms is especially like a set of variations on the themes of Pss 1 and 2

- 1&2 = “the theme of God’s blessing of the righteous and rejection of the wicked, especially as manifested specifically in Zion’s king on the one hand and his enemies on the other.” – this is played out throughout bk1.
  - **Who is acceptable to God**, eg. Pss15,24.
  - **Troubles of the king**: eg. ps3, king away from Zion, God’s holy hill on which the anointed was installed in ps2.
  - **Protection and blessing enjoyed by the king**, eg. 23.
  - **Prayers of the king, (“ask of me”, 2:8)**, ps18.
  - **The trustworthiness of the word of God**, eg pss19, 32-34.

#### 7. If psalms 1&2 are taken together as an introduction we see how *wisdom* and *royal* themes are held together in the psalms

- Wilson says: Wisdom and Royal themes compete, with wisdom winning – wisdom being defined as allegiance to the sole kingship of Yahweh.
- But unnecessary conflict: not least because 1&2 link the themes:
  - The wise man of 1 is the king (Christ) receiving the nations in 2.
  - For us to be wise is to bow before the Christ, the one through whom Yahweh rules.