

An INTRODUCTION to the Book of Psalms (Part I)

The book of Psalms belongs to the genre called poetry. It has to be interpreted differently from genres like narratives or parables or epistles. As I am preaching from the book of Psalms whenever I am invited to True Life BPC to preach, I thought that it might be a good thing to write out the notes on all the 150 Psalms. This is the first instalment of our study on Psalms.

Bullock captured the essence and nature of the book of Psalms. He wrote, "Old Testament history and theology are impressed upon this book in fragmented and unsystematic form. The dynamism of history and personal encounter with God exudes from these songs. They have not only arisen out of history and personal encounter, but have also stood the test of the same. To read and pray the Psalms is to join the voices of numberless people who too have read and prayed them, have felt their joy, anguish, and indignation." (Bullock, page 111)

The Psalms were not written from a theoretical perspective but from hearts that longed for God. They were cries from the depths of souls hurt by the many vicissitudes of life. Therefore, they allow us to understand the spirit of the faith of God's people. The Psalms stand as a monumental witness to the timeless and universal nature of all mankind, both evil and godly. Despite man's inclination to sin and wretched state, we find in the book of Psalms a loving and patient God who comes to the aid of all who would cry to Him.

"This collection of ancient hymns represents a wide spectrum of life's experiences, a broad range of social ranks from kings to commoners, a microcosm of human emotions and situations, and a catalogue of spiritual experiences. The simple and sublime of both human experiences and ancient Hebrew poetry exist side by side in this book. Wherever an individual finds himself on the journey of faith, the Psalms provide a place of rest and a time of repose and reflection, as well as a stimulus to send him on his way. As the occasion of life diversify and emotions intensify, the value of the Psalms increases proportionately." (Bullock, pages 111-112)

Our English title, "The Psalms," obtained its name from the Latin Vulgate which in turn obtained its name from the Greek versions of the Old Testament.

The three English titles are: The Psalms; The Psalter; and The Book of Psalms.

- a. "The Psalms" came from the Septuagint (or LXX at about 250-150 B.C.) The Greek word was "*Psalmoi*" which is a translation of the Hebrew *Mizmor* which means "sing a song with stringed instrument."
- b. "The Psalter" came from the later Greek manuscript (about 400 A.D.) of the Old Testament which entitled the book as "*Psalterion*," meaning a stringed instrument.
- c. "The Book of Psalms" came from the Latin *Liber Psalmorum* based upon Jerome's translation.¹

¹ NOTE that Jesus referred to "the book of Psalms" in Luke 20:42, and Peter spoke of it by the same title in Acts 1:20.

The Hebrew Bible appropriately entitled the book "Praises" (from *tehillim*), a word which means "praise." ALL the 150 Psalms, except Psalm 88 (which has no note of praise in it at all), carry a note of praise. The Hebrew Bible contains 150 Psalms. The Protestant Bible follows the Hebrew numbering.

The Development and Compilation of the Book of Psalms

The two lines of development of the book of Psalms are: the development of Hebrew poetry and psalmody; and the growth of the Psalter up to its present form.

a. OLD TESTAMENT PSALMODY-- despite the discovery of the non-biblical texts like the Ras Shamra texts, hymns from Egypt, Sumero-Akkadian and Hittite, the Hebrew OT Psalmody is a class by itself. There is no comparison between the works of fallible men and that of Holy Writ inspired by God Himself.

The history of Hebrew Psalmody may be traced to the time of Moses. The Israelites celebrated their victory at the Red Sea with hymns, the songs of Moses and Miriam (Exo. 15:1-18, 21). In like manner was the victory of Deborah and Barak over Jabin the king of Canaan (Judg. 5). "With time the Hebrews even collected their poetry. It is thought that the Book of Jasher, which contained the hymn commemorating Joshua's victory over the Ammorites (Josh. 10:13) and David's lament over the death of Saul (2Sam. 1:17-27), was a book of poetry, or at least contained poetic materials. It is certainly plausible that by the time the books of Joshua and Samuel were written, some Hebrew collections of poetry existed." (Bullock, page 113)

King David's involvement in the tradition of the psalmody was no accident. The reasons are:

- * *David had great musical abilities* (cf. 1 Sam. 16:18, 23; 2 Sam. 6:5; Neh. 12:36; Amos 6:5);
- * *David's role as founder or organizer of Temple musicology* (cf. 1 Chron. 15:16; 16:7; 25:1; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:24, 46 (this last ref. includes Solomon); and
- * *David as founder of Hebrew psalmody* (cf. Neh. 12:24, 36, 46).
- * *David's poetry is found outside the Book of Psalms as well* (cf. 2 Sam. 1:19-27-- lament over Saul's death; 2 Sam. 22:2-51--a near duplicate of Psalm 18 was a psalm of thanksgiving after he had been delivered from all his enemies; 2 Sam. 3:33-34 -- a brief lament over Abner's death; and 2 Sam. 23:2-7--David's superb last words).

Old Testament poetry did not die with the death of King David. It lived on and as seen from the songs in some of the prophetic books². The conclusion was that psalmody was a popular literary genre which spanned most of Old Testament history.

b. PROCESS OF GROWTH -- Five factors point to a compilation of the Book of Psalms into its present form. They are:

²Isaiah 5:1-7; 23:16; 26:1-6; 27:2-5;--prophesied during the 8th and 7th Century B.C.; Ezekiel 19--prophesied during the 6th Century B.C. after he was captured and brought to Babylon in 597 B.C.; Hosea 6:1-3--prophesied during the 8th Century B.C.; and Habakkuk 3--about 6th Century B.C.

- a. *many authors and wide ranging dates* (probably over a period of centuries)
- b. *the presence of duplicate psalms* (e.g. Psalms 53 and 14; 70 and 40:13-17; 108 and 57:7-11 and 60:5-12)
- c. *the subordinate grouping within the Book of Psalms itself.*

The Book of Psalms has FIVE-Book divisions:

Division I: Psalms 1-41

Division II: Psalms 42-72

Division III: Psalms 73-89

Division IV: Psalms 90-106

Division V: Psalms 107-150

At the conclusion of all the five books, there is a doxology. The entire Psalm 150 is a doxology (sometimes called the "Great Hallelujah).

Division I: Psalm 41:13

Division II: Psalm 72:19

Division III: Psalm 89:52

Division IV: Psalm 106:48

Division V: Psalm 150

[to be continued]