

## Israel's Songs of Hope *The Book of Psalms*

### The Past, Present, and Future of the House of David *A Literary and Thematic Study*

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Last modified: March 1, 2015

#### **The Story of David's House in the Book of Psalms<sup>1</sup>**

*Book 1:* Psalms 1 – 41 reflect the calling and early life of David. In David, God has prepared a man who meditates on Him and His teaching (Ps.1). God then anoints him as king (Ps.2), fulfilling His promise from the Torah to bring forth a king that will rule over the nations (Gen.49:8 – 12; Num.24:1 – 19; Dt.17:14 – 20). But David faces enemies who persecute him (Pss.3 – 7; 9 – 14; 17 – 18; 20 – 23; 25 – 28; 30 – 31; 34 – 38). He marvels at the creation and the majesty of God (Pss.8, 19) and confesses his sin (Pss.32, 38). Eventually, however, David recognizes that the Torah foresaw a godly king for Israel, and he is now that king: 'Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book, it is written of me' (Ps.40:7 – 17). David in song says that God has delivered him from his enemies so that he might reign on the throne (Ps.41:11 – 13).

*Book 2:* Psalms 42 – 72 reflect the actual reign of David. There are psalms of praise and thanksgiving that celebrate God as help, deliverer, and refuge. The Psalms of the sons of Korah (Pss.42 – 49) might reflect a choir that David installed in for service in the sanctuary when he was king. Psalm 45 celebrates the king's marriage. Psalm 51 is David's confession of sin and failure connected to Bathsheba and Uriah. The book ends with a psalm ascribed to Solomon, the immediate heir of David, and has allusions to the covenant God made with David in 2 Samuel 7.

*Book 3:* Psalms 73 – 89 reflect the tragic history of the Davidic line. Psalms 73 – 89 is the darkest section of the Psalms. Psalm 89 contrasts God's promises to David's royal line (89:1 – 37) with the decline and sinfulness of David's house (89:38 – 51). As the kings sin, and as the people of Israel decline into sin and ruin, the promises of God are the only hope. The collection of Asaph's Psalms (Pss.73 – 83) reflects Asaph the chief worship leader who accompanied David when he brought the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chr.16:5). This may be why Psalm 50, a Psalm of Asaph, is located in book two, which seems to represent the actual reign of David. However, Asaph's sons led worship and prophesied under the direction of the king (1 Chr.25), so this collection of Psalms may reflect the institutionalization of worship at the temple under David's heirs.

*Book 4:* Psalms 90 – 106 reflect Israel's exile and a renewed focus on Moses and Torah. Moses' voice is heard in Psalm 90, which suggests a reminder of the Sinai covenant which occurred long before a king had emerged in Israel (1 Sam.8). David's voice, meanwhile, is muted. The section of Psalms 93 – 99 brings into focus the theme of God being the true king of Israel despite the waywardness of the people. The book ends with Psalm 106, which recounts God's promises to regather the nation from exile.

*Book 5:* Psalms 107 – 150 reflect hopes for God to renew the covenant, restore the place of true worship, and bring people back to true observance of His relational vision and moral law. God will regather Israel (Ps.107). David's line will be renewed (Pss.108 – 110). The observance of Torah within Israel will be renewed (Pss.112, 119). A new Temple will be built (Psalm 118). But this is not the doing of the first David, who was flawed and broken; it must be a new David, the Messiah (Pss.110; 138 – 145). That is one way to understand why the Psalter says that 'the prayers of David son of Jesse are ended' at the end of the second book (Ps.72:20), yet why the voice of 'David' reemerges in Psalm 110 and 138 – 145. So as the Songs of Ascent (Pss.120 – 134) were repeated by the Jews whenever they made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they were reminding themselves of these promises and giving voice to God's own yearnings for the restoration of the Davidic house, Israel, and all creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1985); Gerald Wilson, 'The Structure of the Psalter,' in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Gordon Wenham, 'Towards a Canonical Reading of the Psalms' in Scott Hahn, Craig G. Bartholomew, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz, Al Wolters, *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006)

### **The Bookends of the Psalms: Arranged to Be Messianic**

The 'compositional seams' between the five books of the Psalms are (1) attributed to David, or (2) are about David, or (3) are reflections on God's covenant promise to David:

Book 1: 1 – 2; 40 – 41  
Book 2: 42; 72  
Book 3: 73; 89  
Book 4: 90; 106  
Book 5: 107; 145 – 150

Beginning Bookend: Psalms 1 and 2

- Both Psalms conclude (1:6; 2:12) by referring to a 'way' that will cause human beings to 'perish' if they travel down it
- Both Psalms speak of folly, either opposing the way of God (Psalm 1) or opposing God's Messiah (Psalm 2)
- Both Psalms speak of 'meditating' or 'plotting' (Ps.1:2; 2:1), which are the same word in Hebrew; and 'sitting' and 'scoffing/laughing' (Ps.1:1; 2:4)
- The first word of Psalm 2 is 'hina' (*so that*), which suggests a continuation of ideas begun in Psalm 1
- The Western manuscript family of the book of Acts includes a reference to Paul's quotation of Psalm 2:7 in Acts 13:3. There, Luke refers to what is 'written in the first Psalm'; which suggests that Psalms 1 and 2 were once recognized as one unified Psalm.

Intermediate Bookends: Each 'Book' of the Psalms ends with a doxology

<sup>41:13</sup> Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,  
From everlasting to everlasting.  
Amen and Amen.

<sup>72:18</sup> Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel,  
Who alone works wonders.  
<sup>19</sup> And blessed be His glorious name forever;  
And may the whole earth be filled with His glory.  
Amen, and Amen.  
<sup>20</sup> The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.

<sup>89:52</sup> Blessed be the LORD forever!  
Amen and Amen.

<sup>106:48</sup> Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,  
From everlasting even to everlasting.  
And let all the people say, 'Amen.'  
Praise the LORD!

<sup>145:21</sup> My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,  
And all flesh will bless His holy name forever and ever.  
(Psalms 146 – 150 are praises)

Ending Bookend: Psalms 146 – 150

- All end with 'hallelujah', which calls together the praise of all creation to God

### **Groupings of Psalms by Author**

David: Psalms 3 – 41; 51 – 70; 138 – 145

The Sons of Korah: 42 – 49; 84; 85; 87; 88 (cf. 1 Chr.6:22 – 44)

Asaph: 50; 73 – 83; cf. 1 Chr.6:39; 15:17; 25:1 – 9 (cf. 2 Chr.5:12; 29:30)

God as King: 93 – 99

Songs of Ascent: 120 – 134

### **Lessons for Exegesis and Hermeneutics**

- The entire Book of Psalms, with all 150 Psalms, needs to be considered whenever we are interpreting any individual Psalm. That is, the incorporation and placement of individual Psalms into the larger Book of Psalms is important. Doing piecemeal exegesis on an individual Psalm is important but not enough.
- Thematic development within the Book of Psalms is significant, for example with the treatment of ‘enemies.’ Who is an enemy? Does David’s self-assessment in Psalm 51 as also an ‘enemy of God’ because of his sin factor into how we read his imprecatory Psalms? It should! The implication is that on some level, we are all beloved by God, and we are all enemies of God. That part of us that needs to be defeated, God will defeat. So we say with David, ‘Create in me a clean heart.’ And we praise God that Jesus did create in himself that clean heart, to share it with us!