

Introduction to the Book of Psalms

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Session 1

Sponsored by Biblelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Psalter, Tehillim, Psalms, Davidic psalms, Hebrew poetry, five-book structure, petition and praise, Levitical choirs, redemptive progression

Abstract

This lecture introduces the Book of Psalms as a deliberately organized literary work rather than a random collection of ancient Israelite poetry. Dr. Fred Putnam examines the five-book division, superscriptions, authorial attributions, and the macro-structural movement from petition and distress to confidence and praise. He also analyzes the historical context of Israelite worship and demonstrates how reading the Psalter as a coherent book reshapes the believer's mind and understanding of God.

Outline

I. Introduction and Titles of the Psalter

A. Names and Origin

1. Psalter/Psalms from Greek Septuagint (Septuagint/Psalterion: poems sung to a harp)
2. Tehillim from Hebrew meaning "praises"

B. Composition and Textual Considerations

1. Approximately 150 poems composed over several hundred years
2. Varying psalm divisions in Latin Vulgate, Greek Septuagint, and Protestant Bibles (e.g., Psalms 9–10, 42–43)
3. Verse numbering differences between Hebrew text (where titles are verse 1) and English translations

II. Categorization and Literary Types

A. Direction and Address

1. Approximately 90 prayers directly addressed to God
2. Approximately 60 reflections, meditations, or exhortations about God

B. Three Primary Genres/Moods

1. Psalms of Praise and Worship ("Happy" Psalms: e.g., Psalms 29, 93, 96, 98, 100) — about one-third
2. Psalms of Petition and Lament ("Sad" Psalms: e.g., Psalms 10, 18) — about one-third
3. Reflective, Meditative, or Instructional Psalms (e.g., Psalms 1, 2, 19, 119, 121)

III. Macro-Structure and Organization of the Psalter

A. The Five-Book Division

1. Book I: Psalms 1–41
2. Book II: Psalms 42–72
3. Book III: Psalms 73–89
4. Book IV: Psalms 90–106
5. Book V: Psalms 107–150

B. Collections by Author and Title

1. Davidic Psalms: 55 out of 72 in Books I–II; postscript at Psalm 72:20 ("prayers of David... are ended")
2. Korahite and Asaphite Psalms in Books II–III (Psalms of sons of Korah and Asaph)
3. Orphan (Anonymous) Psalms: rare in Books I–III (3 in Book I, 4 in Book II, 0 in Book III), dominant in Books IV–V (42 total)
4. Groupings by divine name (Yahweh vs. Elohim sections) and Hallelujah psalms

C. Structural Movement of the Psalter

1. Transition from petition/laments (Books I–III) to praise/adoration (Books IV–V)
2. Internal progression within individual psalms from desperation to confidence and praise

IV. Historical Function in Israelite Worship

A. Ancient Performance and Musical Context

1. Musical instruments and chanting vs. modern vocal concepts
2. Historical references in 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, and Nehemiah

B. Chronicler's Account (1 Chronicles 16)

1. David assigning worship to Asaph and Levitical choirs
2. Composite song (pastiche) combining portions of Psalms 105, 96, 106, and 72

C. Liturgical and Thematic Groupings

1. So-called Penitential Psalms (e.g., Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143)
2. Songs of Ascents / Pilgrim Psalms (Psalms 120–134)

V. Implications for Reading and Understanding the Psalms

A. Reading the Psalter as an Arranged Book

1. Intentional contextual placement of neighboring psalms
2. Macro-thematic clusters (e.g., Kingship psalms in Psalms 91–100)

B. Transformative Function of Meditative Poetry

1. Shaping, cleansing, and renewing the believer's mind
2. Communicative nature of God through creation and word (e.g., Psalm 19)
3. Affirming the ultimate redemptive shape of reality