

PSALMS - PART I

OVERVIEW OF THE PSALMS

I. The psalms were the inspired hymn book for ancient Israel.

A. Other books contain prayers. The psalms are a book of prayers. "The psalms constitute the masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament." Catechism of the Catholic Church 2596.

B. Jews and Christians have throughout history sung these psalms as an integral part of their liturgy. Thus, when we pray the psalms, we are praying the same prayers that Jesus and all the People of God have prayed throughout the centuries.

1. They are especially a part of our Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, which is obligatory for all priests, deacons, and religious and encouraged for the laity.

2. Because they were written as songs, the psalms are ideally sung during the Mass. See The Introduction to the Lectionary 20 (1981).

3. Priests have included the psalms as a part of their daily prayer from the earliest days of the Church, as indicated by the witness of the likes of Tertullian, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Benedict. St. Benedict indicates that the early monks would even pray the entire psalter every day. See rule of St. Benedict 18.

4. The tradition of the Liturgy of the Hours was to pray all of the psalms every week. In order to allow for a more attentive prayer, and attention to other pastoral duties the Vatican II Council revised the requirements of praying the Liturgy of the Hours such that all of the psalms would be prayed (with the exception of 58, 83, and 109) over the course of four weeks instead..

C. The psalms were at the beginning of the Jewish Writings in their Scripture, the books that basically constitute what we call the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Jesus indicates that they enjoy a special place in speaking of His life, death, and resurrection. See Luke 24:44.

D. The psalms were written from about the time of David (or even a little earlier) to sometime after the return of the Chosen People from exile in 538 B.C., with some possibly written as late as the second century B.C.

II. Ordering of the Psalms

A. The main Hebrew text differs in its numbering from the Septuigint, the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used most heavily by the human authors of the New Testament and the early Church.

1. The Septuigint combines psalms 9 and 10 from the Hebrew text into one, and does the same with psalms 114 and 115 in the Hebrew text. The Septuigint then splits psalm 116 and 147 from the Hebrew text into two parts. Both have 150 psalms.

2. Most translations now follow the ordering of the Hebrew text.

B. It is likely that the Book of Psalms combines five books together. These books would have been: (1) Psalms 1-41 (or 3-41); (2) Psalms 42-72; (3) Psalms 73-89; (4) Psalms 90-106; and (5) Psalms 107-150 (or 107-145). Psalms 1-2 and 146-150 could have been either a part of the first and last books, or may have been included later as an introduction and conclusion to the whole Book of Psalms.

- Each of the books ends with a refrain along the lines of "Blessed be the Lord, the god of Israel, from age to age."

- Sometimes, two very similar psalms will be in different books of the one Book of Psalms. For example, Psalms 14 and 53 are very similar, as are Psalm 40:12-18 and Psalm 70.

C. There are also subsets of the Psalms, such as the Pilgrim Psalms (120-134) and the Hallel Psalms, or Psalms of Praise (113-118).

V. There are many different types of psalms, and there are various ways of classifying them to help keep track of them. Most of the psalms do not fit neatly into a category, but classifying them according to their major themes can still be helpful for the purpose of considering the various themes

A. One tradition is to divide the psalms into five categories: royal psalms, hymns, psalms of lamentations, psalms of history, and wisdom psalms

C. Fr. Boadt, in Reading the Old Testament uses 10 classifications: hymns of praise, hymns of thanksgiving, individual laments, community laments, liturgical psalms, wisdom psalms, psalms of trust, royal psalms of the king, royal psalms of God as King, and Zion Hymns. Breaks the historical psalms into several parts.

D. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary lists six categories: hymns of praise, royal psalms, laments, wisdom psalms, historical psalms, and liturgical psalms.

E. Combining them together, we will cover, after two categories that cross lines,

1. The Royal Psalms, which describe the ideal king of God's People: 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144.

2. The Historical Psalms, which describe God's work in Israel's and the world's history: 78, 105, 106, 114, 135-136.

3. Psalms of Wisdom and Law, which praise the guidance of God and contrast the ways of the wise and the foolish: 1, 19, 36, 37, 49-50, 73, 78, 112, 119, 127, 128.1

4. Psalms of Lament: 3-7, 9-10, 12-14, 17, 22, 25-28, 31, 35, 38-39, 41-44, 51-61, 64, 69, 70-71, 74, 77, 79-80, 83, 85-86, 88-90, 94, 102, 109, 120, 123, 126, 129-130, 137, 139, 141-143.

5. Hymns of Praise: 8, 19, 24, 29, 33, 47, 66, 93, 95-99, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, 145-150.

6. Psalms of Trust and Thanksgiving: 11, 15-16, 18, 23, 27, 30, 32, 34, 40, 46, 48, 62, 63, 65-68, 81-82, 91-92, 107, 116, 118, 121, 124-125, 131, 136, 138.