

POWERFUL IN MAKING US WISE TO SALVATION,
witness to faith in Christ Jesus the Word;
breathed out for all by the life-giving Father –
these are the Scriptures, and thus speaks the Lord.

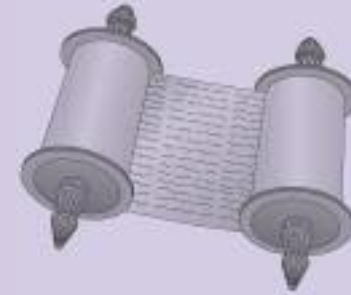
Hammer for action and compass for travel,
map in the desert and lamp in the dark;
teaching, rebuking, correcting and training –
these are the Scriptures, and this is their work.

History, prophecy, song and commandment,
gospel and letter and dream from on high;
words of the wise who were steered by the Spirit –
these are the Scriptures; on them we rely.

Gift for God's servants to fit them completely,
fully equipping to walk in his ways;
guide to good work and effective believing –
these are the Scriptures, for these we give praise!

CHRISTOPHER IDLE
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AN OLD TESTAMENT OVERVIEW



7

THE PSALMS

Israel's Poetry

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

JOHN 5:39-40

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Psalms is a book of poetry. About one third of the Old Testament is poetry, e.g. Psalms, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, most of Job, some of Proverbs. Much of the prophetic literature. There are also songs and poems included in the historical narratives, e.g. Moses' song at the Red Sea, the song of Deborah, David's lament over Saul and Jonathan.

What is poetry? • Designed to arouse feelings. Poetry expresses things in a vivid, stirring and memorable way. Use of figures of speech, picture language etc. **Designed to be remembered, recited or sung.** Metre or rhythm helps with this. So does e.g. rhyme, alliteration.

The Book of Psalms • Israel's hymn book. The longest book in the Bible. Probably the most widely read book in the Bible. The OT book most quoted in the NT. A collection of 150 psalms – divided into 5 smaller books or collections each ending with a doxology.

110 of the psalms have introductory titles or headings which are probably part of the original Hebrew text and should be taken seriously. Nearly half the Psalms are said to be "of David". Fourteen of them are ascribed to specific incidents in David's life. Others are ascribed to the sons of Korah or to Asaph and others. Psalms 120-134 are described as "songs of ascents", probably meaning that they were sung by pilgrims on the uphill journey to Jerusalem. Some of the headings include obscure Hebrew words which are instructions to musicians, names of tunes etc.

It has been said that while the rest of the Bible speaks **to** us, the Psalms speak **for** us. While the psalms are experiential and emotional they are based on solid truth. There is great theology in the psalms. For centuries the church sang little else but the psalms.

Types of psalms • The psalms are examples of the sort of things we can say to God – the prayers, protests and praises that are acceptable to him.

Laments. Prayers for deliverance in situations of great need such as persecution by enemies (Ps. 3), betrayal (Ps. 55), slander (Ps. 7), but also illness (Ps. 6, 38), homesickness (Ps. 42, 43) and old age (Ps. 71). One is a **penitential psalm** – a prayer for deliverance from guilt (Ps. 51). The laments usually follow a pattern: an urgent description of need; a complaint or protest often asking the question, "Why?"; a claim of innocence; a request for help from God, usually leading to a confident looking forward to deliverance and even praise and thanksgiving for the deliverance that is sure to come.

Most of the laments are **personal laments**, but there are also **communal laments** written at times of national disaster such as defeat in battle or exile (e.g. Ps. 44, 74, 79, 137).

Two problems with laments. Apparent self-righteousness (e.g. Ps. 17:1-5; Ps. 26). Desire for revenge (Ps. 35:4-8 etc.).

In some laments the suffering described goes way beyond anything we know in David's experience, and the repercussions of the deliverance are so wide, that they can only ultimately describe the sufferings and deliverance of the ultimate innocent sufferer – the suffering Servant of God (e.g. Ps. 22, 69).

Thanksgivings. Closely linked with laments but opposite to them. Expressions of joy and thanksgiving, and sometimes the payment of a vow, in response to a specific answer to prayer or deliverance (e.g. Ps. 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138).

Communal thanksgivings for a national deliverance (e.g. Ps. 65).

Hymns of Praise. General expressions of praise to God without reference to a specific blessing or deliverance. They praise God for his greatness or goodness or grace (Ps. 100, 103, 145-147, 149, 150) or they celebrate his universal rule (Ps. 24, 93, 95-99). Some are hymns celebrating creation (Ps. 8, 104).

Psalms of confidence. General expressions of confident trust in God (Ps. 11, 16, 23, 27, 91, 121).

Teaching psalms (wisdom psalms). Instruction addressed to man rather than prayers addressed to God. (Ps. 1, 2, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 132).

History psalms. Reviews of Israel's history emphasising God's grace to Israel in spite of her lack of response (Ps. 78, 105, 106, 135, 136).

Psalms about God's law. (Ps. 1, 19, 119).

Psalms of Zion. Psalms centred on Jerusalem or the Temple (Ps. 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122).

Royal psalms. Psalms about or to or by Israel's king. Some were sung by or to the king at his coronation (Ps. 2, 72, 110) or his wedding (Ps. 45). Some are prayers for the king (Ps. 20, 21, 132) or by the king (Ps. 101). The language of some of the royal psalms is so extravagant that they can only apply to an ideal king. In practice most of the kings of Israel were total failures. Even Jews therefore believed that some of them were Messianic psalms applying ultimately to the King of kings.

"All life is in the psalms" (Alec Motyer). In the psalms *everything* is taken to the Lord in prayer.