

## An Overview of Psalms 1-150

In 1970 while at Princeton, Bernard Anderson, a Scotsman, wrote, “In our troubled times, the church is reliving the experience of the ancient Israelites when a short cut to the promised land from Egyptian slavery was denied and, “God led the people by way of the wilderness.”<sup>i</sup> (Exodus 13:18) For forty years they fought and all but two of them died. In 1922, T. S. Eliot in “The Wasteland” used the term, “a heap of broken images.” In the 1970’s, Anderson teaches us something as we experience major cultural changes in the twenty-first century, “people have learned to praise God anew, not just in times of his presence, but also in times of his absence.”

These prayers and praise songs are the medium through which we seek the will of God.; indeed, they are the divine Word itself. The prayers of Israel as our psalms direct us to God and we have become also identified with God’s word to his people. We read the psalms to learn the way of righteousness. Psalm 1 insists, “Their delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law, they meditate day and night.”

When referring to any individual psalm, we should never say, “psalms.” Each psalm is singular. The word “psalm” means “praise song” if literally translated from Hebrew. However, some of the psalms are “complaint psalms” rather than praise! These are called Lament psalms. There are also Imprecatory Psalms. That word means putting a curse on one’s enemies! Our English word “psalms” comes from the Greek Septuagint translation that used their word *psalmos* that means “music of stringed instruments.” They were sung in Temple worship to the only musical instruments of that era—strings!

The psalms contain humanity's words to God and God's Word to humanity! They do not reflect a secular view of life, but a theo-centric view; that is, God is the center of all life, secular as well as sacred. The premise of Theo centrality is that we are not free amoral *homo sapiens*; we are created by God, inspired in our willful decision-making by God’s Spirit, and accountable to God. Our familiarity with some of the psalms is because in them we see the reflection of the entire spectrum of experiences of our lives; indeed, we see the life experience of the entire human race. John Calvin, in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, described them as, “the anatomy of all the parts of the soul.”

**Everyone’s image is reflected in this mirror.** All the griefs, sorrows, fears, misgivings, hopes, cares, anxieties, and affirmations are expressed. Some of the psalms we love and read and commit to memory. They are devotional, meditative, reflective. Even in times of severest trials, the writers of the psalms learned to sing songs of praise to God.

Mortimer Cohen, a Jewish scholar, writes this about the psalms: “*The Book of Psalms is a collection of inspired poems telling how the psalmists of Israel met sorrow or joy, fear or trust, dark sinning, or righteous living. Whether we are lonesome and unhappy, depressed, guilty and ashamed over our wrongdoing, or so overjoyed that we lack words to express our feelings; we can find a psalmist who is in the same ‘mood of the soul.’*”<sup>ii</sup>

Even the psalms which do not reflect Christian theology are in the Bible for a reason; they are indeed inspired. Dr. Walter Brueggemann assures us of the inspirational reality of the psalms and prophetic writings: “we can be sure that there were indeed specific, unprecedented, individuals who made ‘out of the ordinary’ utterances, and who were understood as having a peculiarly connection with God. This made them effective channels between God and humankind.”

The Psalter assured the Israelites, and assures us, that **this book speaks a word of God to each of us in our need; the psalms are a “living voice” to us.** They are an invaluable source for the care of our souls, and we deny ourselves a great solace if we do not read them often, commit some verses to memory, and see others as a paranoia and spiritual pride that we best avoid! If we are wise in recognizing the authority of scripture, we shall meditate on these older forms even as we articulate praise to God in a new format of prayer, music, or preaching. The psalms, in sync with all inspired writing, does not squeeze God’s divine word into our contemporary molds; rather, if we are to accept the psalms as God’s word to which we respond affirmatively, our task is to fit contemporaneity into the paradigm of the scriptures. Often this requires what Jesus repeatedly called “the Kingdom of God” and what John Wesley called “the scriptural way of salvation.” It is God, not government nor economic wealth nor any modicum of security we find in this present age that will lead us to the Kingdom whose foundation is steadfast love and whose expression of that love is amazing grace—“O God our help in ages past; our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blasts and our eternal home.” This is the paradigm of the Bible.

Israel suffered so many setbacks, so many military defeats, so many times of famine that they naturally questioned God. The psalms are speckled with references to “the wicked,” and the mystery of their having health and wealth when that psalm writer did not.

**The psalms are devotional “honest to God” confessions and affirmations and petitions.** Some reflect a spiritual conceit; but this is their ability to be a mirror in which we all might be reflected from time to time! Others reflect a paranoia that is also a demon we all know! Still others ask God to punish our enemies, and though it is embarrassing to admit, we might have been guilty of this revenge and hatred of those who have abused or manipulated us. There is a psalm for every season of the soul—some are a “balm”, and others are a “flame.”

Many of the psalms are focused on Zion. Zion is another term for Jerusalem. Some of the psalms are called **royal** psalms because they focus on the king. These two types of psalms are very Jewish and not as universally committed to memory as the more generic ones.

Clinton McCann of Candler School of Theology sees the psalms as “anticipating Jesus' bold presentation of God's claim upon the whole world.”<sup>iii</sup> **In Jesus, we see the embodiment of what the psalms often call us to--calm, serenity, inner peace, forgiving and being forgiven, simpler living style, and recognizing that happiness is not in stuff, but in our innermost being.**

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<sup>i</sup> Ibid. 1

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1. Cohen, Mortimer, *Pathways Through the Bible*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 421
  2. McCann, Clinton, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1996, Vol. IV, 641