

## HOW TO READ THE PSALMS AS A BOOK OF PRAISES

We often approach the Book of Psalms as a collection of 150 individual psalms of lament, thanksgiving, praise, and penitence, and nothing more. We see each psalm as different from every other psalm. The truth, however, is that although each psalm might differ from the others, the 150 psalms tell one cohesive story, and each psalm contributes to that one narrative.

To see how this is so, let's begin with the ancient division of the Psalms into five books. The ends of Books 1-4 (psalms 41:13, 72:19, 89:52, 106:48) all end with a doxology and a double amen. Book 5 does not have a doxology or a double Amen. Instead, it ends with a resounding series of five psalms (146-150) that are called "The Great Hallel" because each begins with Hallelujah, or "Praise the Lord" (*hallel* means "praise"). There is unity between the books.

Moreover, many of the "seams" of the books contain references to kingship. Psalms 38-41 reflect upon the great uncertainty of David's kingship, even the sins of God's chosen king. Psalm 72, written by Solomon, is a bright and hopeful declaration of God's favor upon the king. Psalm 89 is a communal lament because the promises of God for His king and royal house seem to have been ignored by God. This is an important clue as to the message of the psalms (other psalms also speak of kingship such as 2 and 110).

Another clue is found by locating David's psalms. If we go by the superscriptions in the Psalms, most of David's 69 psalms are found in Book 1 (37) and in Book 2 (18). Book 3 contains one Davidic psalm, Book 4 has two Davidic psalms, and Book 5 has 11. Most of David's psalms are laments. In fact, most psalms in the book of Psalms are "sad psalms" (psalms of laments, imprecations [or curses], and repentance) not "happy psalms" (psalms of joyous praise and thanksgiving), whether or not they were written by David.

Taken together, the royal motif and the positioning of David's psalms seem to indicate a running commentary on David and his kingship. In the first two books (psalms 1-72), David is the main character. He is the chosen king of YHWH. Yet, a closer look indicates that the royal house of this mere human is full of uncertainty, provisionality, doubt, and sin. What kind of kingdom can outlast all kingdoms if it can totter and be overthrown by enemies within and without? The certainty at the end of Book 2 (Psalm 72) gives way to the utter darkness that engulfs Israel by the end of Book 3 (Psalm 89) because God seems to have turned His back on Israel's king. A merely human king will not do.

The progression of the Psalms, then, is that we are led by God through King David to a better King: God Himself. The eternal kingship of YHWH is powerfully asserted in Books 4 and 5 as the movement of the book of Psalms is meant to strip us of our trust in all things and people so that we would trust God alone. Friendships, wealth, power, men, horses and chariots, even the mountains and hills— all prove to be a futile and shakeable foundation. Only YHWH, the God over all gods, can provide a sure foundation for living; thus, only YHWH is worthy of praise. The exclusive kingship of YHWH, in the background at the Psalter's beginning, is unambiguously asserted at its end (145:1, 11-13; 149:2).

The progression of the Psalter is found not only in the broad sweep of the book but also on a smaller scale in individual psalms. Psalm 23 is a classic example: there is an initial confidence in God, a disorienting brush with death, and then a deeper, renewed trust in the Lord's comprehensive provision that ends with dwelling with the Lord forever, a state much better than the first.

The progression of the Psalms also makes sense of the Hebrew name for the Psalms, *Tehillim*, or "Praises." If most of the book is sad, why the title of "Praises"? It is because to know the true significance of our lament is to praise God. There is much in life that is unfathomable. Yet, nothing is unknown to God. That is why God's people are called to direct all their prayers and praises to Him, especially in times of suffering. The praise of God is the great goal of God's people, and this is how the Psalter concludes.

*Some of this has been paraphrased from the works of Gerald Wilson, Geoffrey W. Grogan, Walter Brueggemann, and Douglas J. Green.*

