PSALMS 1-89

Eric Lane

'A commentator of yesteryear once said that he never wrote a commentary on a Bible book before he had read the book through at least fifty times. Eric Lane shows the same extensive direct contact with the text and this gives his work an attractive and stimulating freshness. His views on the chronological order of the psalms are somewhat controversial but will likewise stimulate the reader.'

Dr Geoffrey Grogan

PSALMS 1-89

The Lord saves

Eric Lane

CHRISTIAN FOCUS




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Notes

Abbreviations:

f	the following verse
cf	compare
MT	Masoretic Text, i.e. the Hebrew text of the Old Testament
LXX	Septuagint, i.e. the Greek translation of the Old Testament, from the 3rd century BC
OT	Old Testament
NT	New Testament
Mg	Margin, i.e. the notes at the bottom of the page in the NIV
KJV	The King James Version of 1611
NKJV	The New King James Version of 1982
GNB	The Good News Bible of 1971
ESV	The English Standard Version of 2001

Books consulted:

J. A. Alexander: *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (Zondervan)
C. C. Broyles: *The Psalms: New International Biblical Commentary* (Hendriksen/Paternoster)
J. M. Good: *Historical Outline of the Book of Psalms* (London: W. H. Dalton, 1842). Out of print
Allan Harman: *The Psalms – a Mentor Commentary* (Mentor/Christian Focus)
G. W. Grogan: *Prayer, Praise and Prophecy* (Mentor/Christian Focus)
F. D. Kidner: *The Psalms* (IVP)
H. C. Leupold: *Exposition of the Psalms* (Evangelical Press)
C. S. Lewis: *Reflections on the Psalms* (Collins Fontana)
W. S. Plumer: *The Psalms* (Banner of Truth)





Introduction

For those desiring further information on the points covered here, references are given to the relevant passages in the books listed above. Particularly valuable is Geoffrey Grogan's recent book 'Prayer, Praise and Prophecy', which is virtually an extended introduction to the Psalms.

1. THE NATURE OF A PSALM

A psalm is basically a poem set to music and sung. This sets the Book of Psalms apart from the other books of Scripture. While there are a few other songs scattered through the books of the Bible (Harman, p. 8), the style of writing in the rest of Scripture tends to be either narrative or didactic. While this might make the Psalms seem less important than other books, and even expendable, it is probably true that for many centuries the Psalms would have been the most familiar part of Scripture to people who had no access to the other books (Broyles, p. 7). Even today, psalms or parts of them are known to people who have never read the rest of the Bible.

Many of the Psalms extol God for his personal greatness and his deeds in history. Others express commitment to his covenant and law, and yet others hope for the coming of the Messianic kingdom (Harman, pp. 9-10) Many are in the form of prayers, complaints and even curses. Nevertheless, praise predominates, so that the title in the Hebrew Bible is SEPHER TEHILLIM – 'Book of Praise-psalms' (Leupold, p. 1).

All this shows the difficulty of generalising about the Psalms. Many were clearly composed to be sung by the people of God gathered together, and these take on a liturgical pattern (Broyles, p. 2, under 'Fourth'). Others are very private and personal, such as those written by David when he was on the run from Saul or cornered by Absalom. Yet even these appear to have been retained and later issued for congregational use, as the inclusion of the words 'for the director of music' in the titles indicates. We therefore have to treat each psalm on its own merits.

2. THE STRUCTURE AND COMPILATION OF THE PSALMS

When we look at the Psalter as a whole, we observe that it is divided into five books, each of which is rounded off with a doxology: at 41:13, 72:18-19, 89:52, 106:48 and 150, the whole of which is a doxology and thus appropriately closes the whole collection.

This arrangement is ancient, for it is found in the Greek translation (the 'Septuagint', or LXX for short) made in the second or third centuries BC. But it has proved impossible to discover for certain the principles on which the divisions were made, if there are any. Clearly it is not **chronological**, for the earliest psalm, by Moses, is number 90 (in Book III), and David's last psalm appears as 72, ahead of earlier ones which are numbered 138 and 145.

Neither is it possible to trace any **theological** development. There are blocks which have a common theme: God's universal kingship in 93–99 , the 'Hallels' in 113–118 and 146 to 150, and the 'Songs of Ascents' in 120–134, but that is the most we can say. There are also some groupings by **author**: 'Psalms of the sons of Korah' in 42–49, and 'of Asaph' in 73–83. But none of this explains the whole structure.

Some have suggested that the books are distinguished by the particular name of God that is preferred. But this only applies to Books I: 'Yahweh' and II: 'Elohim' (Kidner, p. 5; Harman, p. 24; Leupold, p. 3). According to Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, collections were made by godly kings such as David, Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah, and by Ezra,

who was the final editor. These men may have been guided by whatever psalms came to hand at various times, and so added a fresh collection to the existing ones. This appears to be how the book of Proverbs was compiled.

It may be that we shall never know the history of the structure of the book. We must remember that Psalms is the longest book of the Bible, and therefore could not be written on one scroll. This purely pragmatic consideration may explain a great deal, as it does with the length of the Gospels. Also, in days when few copies would be available, it is possible that each synagogue was rationed to one scroll. It would therefore be desirable that a representative selection of psalms, covering different subjects, activities and experiences of the godly life, should comprise each scroll. Although we have the whole Psalter, it is no bad method to follow this scheme of a book at a time in personal Bible study and preaching. The origin of the structure then need not bother us too much.

3. AUTHORSHIP

Many psalms claim to have been written by David and others. Some even refer to the specific event which occasioned a psalm. In our English Bibles these superscriptions are not seen as part of the text and are therefore not given a verse number. In the Hebrew Bible they are, which explains why our verse numbering is out of kilter with the Hebrew Bible. This doesn't mean they were inserted by the authors themselves, since they are written in the third person; for example, Psalm 3 reads: 'A psalm of David when **he** fled from **his** son Absalom' (emphasis mine). They must therefore have been added by a later editor, although who and when is not known. They were there before the third century BC, since they feature in LXX.

This is partly why many modern scholars reject them as unhistorical – 'conjectures made by the collectors'. They also point out that the preposition translated 'of' (Hebrew Le) does not necessarily mean 'by', but can mean 'to ... for ... about' (Broyles, pp. 27-28). They also point to anachronisms such as the term 'temple', which did not exist in David's time. They claim that in many cases the situation in the superscription doesn't fit the subject matter.

Conservative scholars tend to be more cautious. They believe that the NT use of the psalms confirms their authorship. For example, Psalm 16 is clearly attributed to the historical David in Acts 2:29, following the quotation of the closing verses of the psalm (Kidner, p. 33). The fact that they were added by an editor does not necessarily invalidate them. They were preserving 'a valuable and well-authenticated tradition which they felt should not be lost and could be of use to readers in centuries to come' (Leupold, p. 6). Broyles has a rather more complex explanation (p. 29).

No doubt psalms which were composed in connection with a particular incident were later edited for use in congregational worship. This would involve some updating to bring them into line with current events or experiences. But the editors felt they should not abandon all reference to their origin. The study of this background throws a great deal of light on the meaning and value of the psalms. This applies not merely to individual psalms but to the whole collection. David is not the only author to whom psalms are attributed (Kidner, pp. 35-36). Those not attributed to anyone or to a particular situation must have been written by someone in connection with a particular event or period. Put together they give us a different approach to the history of Israel from that recorded by the Biblical authors. The histories are purely factual but in the psalms we see how people felt about what was happening, and particularly how they prayed or praised.

This approach has been developed in the Appendix to my commentary on Psalms 90–150 by suggesting an historical order.

4. POETRY

Much of the Bible is written in poetry. There are fragments almost from the beginning, the earliest being Adam's words on seeing Eve for the first time:

> This is now bone of my bones
> and flesh of my flesh;
> She shall be called 'woman'
> For she was taken out of man (2:23).

Evidently the sight of her so struck Adam that he burst into verse and gave us the first love poem! There are also whole books in verse, such as Job and Proverbs, plus many passages in the prophets. This may not be immediately obvious to readers, since Hebrew poetry is very different from English. Our poetry is far more complex, with a number of different styles, from 'blank verse' to the elaborate sonnet form, both used by Shakespeare. We also have a number of different meters in which the accents fall on the syllables, and frequently rhyme is used. Hebrew poetry is much simpler: the accents are on the words rather than the syllables, which makes the rhythm more difficult to detect, and there are no rhymes. The nearest equivalent in English poetry would be the 'sprung' rhythm of Gerald Manley Hopkins.

The chief feature of Hebrew poetry is **parallelism**, in which the thought of one line is repeated in the next in different words. For example:

> He does not treat us as our sins deserve,
> or repay us according to our iniquities (103:10).

This is called 'synonymous parallelism'. There is also 'synthetic parallelism', where the second line adds something to the first, for example:

> The LORD is near to all who call on him ,
> to all who call on him in truth (145:18).

Lastly, there is 'antithetic parallelism', in which the second line contrasts with the first, for example:

> The wicked borrow and do not repay,
> but the righteous give generously (37:21).

This latter form is used in many of the Proverbs. It is important to bear this in mind in interpreting the psalms, especially in the case of 'synonymous parallelism'. We should not try to find a different meaning in the second part of a verse where it is simply repeating the thought of the first line.

All the psalms are poems for the simple reason that they were designed for singing. The music of the words easily lent

itself to melodies which enabled the congregation to sing the psalms together. What these melodies were like will probably never be known. Possibly they were not completely unlike the 'chants' used by churches which sing the psalms in their original form.

5. TECHNICAL TERMS

There are several technical terms (mostly found in the titles or superscriptions) of which the meaning cannot be precisely determined.

Selah is the most frequent, occurring seventy-one times. It appears to be derived from a Hebrew word meaning 'to lift up'. This may indicate an interlude in which the musicians took up their instruments, or simply an increase in volume, like our term 'crescendo'.

Higgaion occurs in 9:16 along with *Selah*, and may mean that the quieter instruments were to be used for this interlude. The term means 'meditation' and is found in Psalms 19:14 and 92:3 as part of the text itself.

Psalm (Hebrew **MIZMOR**) is used frequently and *Song* (Hebrew **SIR**) occasionally. The difference seems to be that the former was composed for a particular occasion and the latter was a more generally known piece.

Other terms are *Shiggaion, Miktam, Maskil, A Prayer, A Praise* and will be commented on in the book as they appear. Kidner gives all these a thorough discussion in his introduction pages 32-46.

The phrase *To the Choirmaster* or *Director of Music*, used fifty-five times, shows that, whatever the particular incident which prompted the psalm, it was passed to the music director to be included in the collection he was compiling or editing. At this point some alterations may have taken place to make it suitable for congregational singing. This would explain how a psalm composed at a time of crisis acquired a complex literary form, such as an acrostic.

Phrases beginning **According to ...** seem to refer to the tune and are commented on in the book as they appear.

6. TYPES OF PSALM

The Psalms have been a happy hunting ground for those whose approach to Scripture is to take well-known verses and isolate them from their context, giving them individualistic and even erroneous interpretations. But it will not only save us from going wrong but also open up these texts more meaningfully if we treat them in accordance with their particular type. For, while we cannot rigidly categorise all the psalms infallibly, we can detect some common forms. The chief ones are the following.

(a) **Hymns**. (Harman, pp. 32, 46-47; Broyles p. 13). These are psalms addressed to God himself in praise and worship. Examples are 92, 103, 113. They tend to begin with a call to worship, addressed either to the writer's own soul (103:1) or to the assembled people by a priest or Levite (113:1). They specify what God has done to merit this praise (103:2-19) and end with a repetition of the call to praise, often extended not merely to all Israel, but to the nations of the earth (96:7-13) and even the inhabitants of heaven (103:20-22).

(b) **Prayers** (Harman, pp. 32, 48; Broyles 16). Many psalms are in the form of earnest petitions to God for help in need. Most come from the pen of David and date from the time of his sufferings at the hand of Saul or other enemies. Such a one is Psalm 4, where he seeks relief from (his) distress (v. 1). Some of these include laments over the degree of suffering being endured. Psalm 13 is a good example, since it not only bewails the trials but complains about their seeming unending duration. How long? is thrice repeated. Often the struggle in prayer is resolved in an assurance that God has heard: 4:7f, 6:8f.

(c) **Thanksgivings**. (Harman, pp. 32, 50; Broyles, p. 18). These are frequently connected with the prayers and laments, and are acknowledgements that God has answered prayer. For example, Psalm 18 is a long recital of God's deliverances, for it comes late in David's life and takes account of his many sufferings and escapes, both from Saul, the neighbouring nations and from Absalom. Others are 32 and 34. But such

psalms are not confined to the individual; some are offered by the whole community: for material blessings (65), victories (75), deliverances (107) and their whole history (136).

(d) **Remembrance** (Harman, pp. 33, 52-54). Some of this type can easily be included under 'Thanksgivings', for they are recollections of God's mighty works for Israel down its history, which prompted the response of thanksgiving. Examples are 78, 105, 106. The likelihood is that these were composed for use on great occasions such as the dedication of the Temple or the major feasts: Passover, Tabernacles, etc.

(e) **Wisdom** (Harman pp. 33, 52; Broyles 21). The main Wisdom literature of the OT lies outside the Psalms – in Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. But some psalms are in the style of those books and tackle the issues they raise: guidance in how to live, understanding of the types of people in the world, especially the 'righteous' and the 'wicked', and the problems thrown up by the clash of these types. These psalms vary considerably. There are those which dwell upon the practicalities of normal life, such as 25, and those which wrestle with the great ethical issues such as why the wicked seem to thrive at the expense of the righteous. Psalms 37 and 73 are the most extensive treatments of this subject. Psalms such as these would be more for personal use than singing in services.

Under this heading we may include psalms which glory in the Law of God (Harman p. 44). In the OT 'law' means more than the code of regulations for personal conduct, government and worship, for the term TORAH approximates to what we call 'the Word of God', that is, divine teaching. So when the psalmists are exulting in their love for the Law, they are rejoicing in the fact that they have a God who teaches them about himself, his world, his special dealings with them and his guidance on how to live. The chief psalms of this type are 1, 19 and 119.

(f) **Kingship**. (Harman, pp. 38-42). Many psalms are addressed to or written about 'the King'. Some of these are

about David or his successors on the throne: 20, 21, 89, 132. To address praises and prayers to a mortal man, even if he is in a position of supreme power, sounds almost blasphemous. We have to remember that the king of Israel was God's representative and therefore what was said to or about him was said to or about God.

But there are also psalms in which God is acknowledged as King in his own right without reference to any human monarch. Israel was a theocracy and the Lord alone was its King. This was why it was only with reluctance that he allowed them to have a human King in the first place. It could be interpreted as a rejection of his own rule (1 Sam. 8:1-9). The only safeguard against this was to keep in view that, whoever occupied the throne of Israel, God was its true King. By singing the psalms regularly they would never be able to forget this: 'The LORD reigns' is a not infrequent phrase. The chief psalms on the Lord's Kingship are 48, 93, 96-99.

But the psalms go beyond this. Israel's God was the only God; all others were man-made idols, so that, whether people acknowledge him or not, he is *King of all the earth* (47:7). That psalm is probably the best one in which to see his universal sovereignty, but there are many other references, e.g. 11:4, 29:10, 50:1-4, 66:1-7, 74:12-17, 96.

(g) **The Messianic Hope** (Leupold, pp. 20-22; Kidner, pp. 18-25). We are probably all familiar with the idea that a Messiah to redeem the human race is promised and predicted in the OT from the fall of man through to the last prophet. The psalms are not excluded from this prophetic note, which is chiefly seen in those psalms which contain the theme of Kingship. One of the best psalms in which to see this idea is one of the earliest (Ps. 2). The occasion appears to be a rebellion of some local kings against Israel's king (vv. 1-3). The psalmist looks beyond this to the universal King (vv. 4-5), who has personally *installed* Israel's king (v. 6), referred to in verse 2 as *his anointed one*, literally MASIAH, from which the word 'Messiah' (Greek 'Christ') comes. The king then pronounces the words with which God inaugurated him (vv. 7-9). The words 'you are my Son' echo what God said to

Samuel in 2 Samuel 7:14, but the kingdom he promised his Son far exceeds what David and his successors possessed; in fact it is universal. The verse in which he is called God's Son is quoted of Jesus in the NT (Matt. 3:17; Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5), and Jesus himself proclaimed his universal kingdom when he sent his disciples 'into all the world to make disciples of all the nations' (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15). Since the reign of Israel's king is undergirded by the King of all the earth, these rebellious kings are advised to make peace with him (vv. 10-12).

Psalm 110 is in similar vein and is also quoted several times in the NT (Matt. 22:44; Acts 2:34-35; Heb. 1:12-13, etc.). Psalm 72, originally written to celebrate Solomon's accession, goes far beyond anything ever achieved in that glorious reign, which never extended 'from the river (Euphrates) to the ends of the earth', nor did 'all kings bow down to him', as Christ is promised they will do to him (Phil. 2:9-11). The psalm begins with a prayer that he will be a righteous man who will reign justly. Although Solomon did not go as far into evil as some of the later kings and approximated to David more than most, he scarcely lived up to this standard (1 Kings 11:6).

The way in which Jesus would come into his kingdom by way of suffering is also to be found in the psalms. Of this David is himself the example, for he suffered much at the hands of Saul in his early days and of Absalom in later ones. He writes of these sufferings in such psalms as 22 and 69. However, they go far beyond anything David ever experienced, and were fulfilled in Jesus down to the last detail: 'they have pierced my hands and my feet' (22:6).

In addition to these the NT applies to Christ several of the less obvious passages in the Psalms, such as Hebrews 2:13 quoting Psalm 22:22, and Romans 15:9 quoting Psalm 18:49. This should not surprise us, since Christ spent the time taken by a seven-mile walk going through the OT Scriptures to bring out *what was said ... concerning himself* (Luke 24:27).

(h) **Covenant** (Harman, pp. 25-29). The nation from which the Psalms came and which sang them in its gatherings was a nation in a particular relationship with God. He had made a

covenant with them by which he declared them 'his people'. This was made with Abraham and his descendants through Isaac (Gen. 17:2, 7) and formally ratifed at Sinai through Moses (Exod. 19:5-6). This covenant assured Israel that God would protect them from their enemies who would be 'cursed' if they 'cursed' Israel (Gen. 12:2-3.) At the same time Israel could be 'cursed' if she broke the laws of the covenant (Lev. 26:14-39). On the other hand, obedience to the covenant guaranteed that God would continue to provide for and protect them (Lev. 26:1-13, 40-45). Later God made a covenant with David to the effect that his descendants would always occupy the throne of Judah (2 Sam. 7:11-16).

Although it would be going too far to speak of specific 'covenant psalms', these covenants are clearly the background to a number of them. Psalm 105:8-11 alludes to the covenant with Abraham; in fact the whole psalm celebrates the works of God down to the time the descendants of Abraham were in Egypt as being in fulfilment of that covenant. For after summarizing the history of Israel up to their journey from Sinai, it gives as the reason 'for he remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham' (v. 42). Psalm 106 virtually takes over where 105 leaves off and thus recalls the Mosaic covenant. Its blessings are celebrated in the first part (vv. 1-12), for their deliverance from Pharaoh at the Red Sea was due to God's promise to protect and deliver his people from their enemies. However, verse 13 goes on to speak of how they 'forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel', that is, they did not act on the terms of the covenant. The consequence was that the curses of the covenant came on them. Psalm 78 is similar, showing how God dealt with Israel according to whether or not they obeyed the conditions of the covenant.

The covenant with David is mentioned at the end of Psalm 78 (vv. 70-72), but has more extended treatment in Psalm 89, especially from verse 19. Psalm 132 is also based on God's covenant with David, but more from the point of view of his choice of Zion than of David and his descendants. Although the use of the term 'covenant' may not be frequent (only twenty-one times) the idea permeates the entire book. Wherever psalms

refer to Israel as 'the people of God' the covenant is in view, because this was its chief clause (Gen. 17:7). 95:7 is a typical example of this: *he is our God and we are the people of his pasture*. Such sentiments can be found all over the psalms. The same applies to the idea of being *chosen* (33:1; 135:4), as it does to the use of the term *servant* (31:16; 89:3). The language of the psalms echoes the covenant all the way through.

We must not overlook those psalms which call on 'the nations' to acknowledge God, and even speak of how they will do so. Look, for example, at 67 and 117. Such passages are not infrequent. Also they are allusions to God's covenant with Abraham, which not only promised to curse Israel's enemies but to bless those who befriended them (Gen. 12:2-3). Indeed it predicted a time when 'all peoples of the earth' would come into this relationship. This great hope is confirmed by the prophets (Isa. 2:2-4) and celebrated in the psalms. When Paul is exulting in the universality of his gospel in Romans 15 he quotes two psalms: 18:49 in verse 9, and 117 in verse 11.

(i) **Imprecations** (Kidner, pp. 25-32; Leupold, pp. 18-20; Harman, pp. 58-52). It does not escape most people's notice that there are passages in the psalms which they find difficult if not impossible to sing, or even read, with a cheerful spirit. These are the passages in which the writer calls down curses on his enemies. The chief culprits are 55, 59, 69, 79, 109 and 137. The latter is particularly notorious, for though it begins with the famous words *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept* and continues in most poignant words which evoke our sympathy, it suddenly ends with about the most vindictive curse that anyone ever made (v. 9). How can anyone sing those words in a Christian service praising God? How could they even sing them in the synagogue or temple before Christ? Modern attempts to make them singable only succeed in sanitizing them: 'be warned of judgment on you and your children', goes Michael Perry's version of the verse in Jubilate Hymns. This of course raises the whole question of how far the psalms of the old covenant are appropriate for worship under the new covenant. Which ones? In what way? We will defer this matter to our last section and now simply try to explain why

such language is present in the Bible. There are two ways of answering this:

1. The curses of the psalms are in line with the nature of the covenant considered above. God's covenant with Israel included curses on those who broke its terms of obedience to God's laws. Some of the psalms were written at times of great wickedness among the people of God, which sometimes went to the length of ill-treatment of the righteous by the wicked. For the psalmists to call down curses on these persecutors was simply to pronounce the judgment of God on them; it was to do in poetry what the prophets did in preaching. Most imprecatory psalms arose out of this kind of situation, especially in connection with David's persecution by Saul and his men. Psalm 59 relates to such an occasion. Psalm 55 probably refers to David's betrayal by Ahithophel, who went over to Absalom, and to all the suffering that followed that. Hence David's prayer of verse 15.

Psalm 69 has a more extended curse (vv. 22-28), and probably refers to Absalom and his followers. Psalm 109 has a similarly long imprecation and again is against Ahithophel. In all this David was not speaking out of turn, but simply echoing what God himself had said. Nor was he saying these words to the people themselves, or to his own friends; they were for God's ears alone, they were prayers. Are we not told not to take vengeance ourselves but put it into God's hands (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19)?

Psalm 137:8-9 is different, for it refers to another nation – Babylon. It sounds vindictive, like 'I'll get you for that!' or 'You did it to me, I'll do it to you!'. But the answer again lies in the covenant: *whoever curses you I will curse* (Gen. 12:3). God's curse is not vindictive language but just judgment. God repays people and nations in proportion to their crimes. He did this repeatedly in the OT and on some occasions Israel herself was his instrument in punishing them. He himself authorised them to destroy wicked and corrupt nations like the Amalekites and Amorites. He authorised the prophets to declare this: Isaiah 13 announced the judgment of Babylon and includes the words: *their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes* (v. 16). The

psalmist was simply concurring in the judgment of God. The Babylonians had done such things to others (2 Kings 25:7), and God would requite them: *Do to her as she has done to others* was Jeremiah's call to the nations to gang up against Babylon (Jer. 50:15). If we have problems with these cursing passages they are not really with the writers and their words, but with God and his judgment. This is not the place to justify God's judgment, but we should remember that it has a place in the New Testament and the teaching of Jesus, as well as in the Old Testament (e.g. Matt. 7:21-23; 13:40-45; 21:44; 24:51; John 5:22; 9:39; Rom. 2:16; 2 Thess. 1:6-10; 2 Peter 3:7-10).

2. The whole Old Testament is prophetic. That is what it means to call it 'the Word of God'. It declares his thoughts and proclaims his acts. These concern not only the past and present but the future too. This prophetic note is found not just in the official prophets but the narrative passages and even the Psalms. Those who spoke and wrote what now forms the Old Testament did so by the Spirit of God, as Christ and his apostles recognised (Matt. 22:43; 2 Pet. 1:21). This is another way of saying they spoke prophetically.

We have seen how many passages in the Psalms go far beyond the experiences of the writers and point to Christ. His salvation was not to be a physical or political deliverance, but a deliverance from sin, the devil and hell. It was to be for all nations as well as for Israel. Psalm 110 is a case in point, as the NT confirms. In the same way as the psalms prophesy salvation they also prophesy judgment. In these cursing passages the writers are speaking not in their own name but God's. They therefore had authority to pronounce guilt and punishment on sinners. Augustine wrote of such passages: 'these are not the words of one wishing mischief may happen to his enemies; they are the words of a prophet, of one who is foretelling in Scripture language the evil that must befall them on account of their sins'.

These points in no way lessen the severity of the language, but they do free it from personal vindictiveness and put it in the context of the whole word of God. We can at least

understand why they are there. Further remarks will be found in the commentary on the particular psalms.

7. SPIRITUAL VALUE

What is the Bible? What is about? Is it a **story**, telling the history of the human race, particularly of one nation up to the coming into the world of the Redeemer, after which the story expands again to the whole race, culminating in the end of the world. Yes, it is clearly that; but is that its main theme and value?

Or is it a book of **doctrine**? Does its value lie in what it teaches about the nature of God, about humanity, about the earth and the universe, about human behaviour, sin and salvation, the creation of the universe and its end? Yes, there is much teaching in the Bible. Indeed it is possible to write 'a theology of the Psalms', as Geoffrey Grogan has recently done. But is that what they are mainly about?

It is possible to know both these aspects in great depth, yet to miss the main point: a personal relationship between man and God. It is to this that both the story and the teaching are designed to lead us. This is where the book of Psalms comes into its own. That is not to say there is no story running through the Psalms. The Appendix to this commentary shows it is possible to link them with the history of Israel from Moses to Ezra. Some psalms are virtual summaries of parts of Israel's history (78, 105, 106). Again, the psalms are full of doctrine. This is why the NT appeals to them when expounding such matters as the divine nature of the Messiah (Matt. 22:41-45; Heb. 1, where five psalms are quoted) or justification by faith (Rom. 4:6-8). The Psalms are linked with the whole teaching of Scripture.

But there is an important difference between the Psalms and the other books of the Bible: their constant use of the first person singular or plural: 'I ... we'. They come out of the life-situations of these historical figures; they describe how these people **experienced** the God who had revealed himself in history, law and prophecy. 'The Psalms are not abstract writings about theology or anything approaching a philosophical discussion of religious themes. They are really

an expression of the knowledge about God and his ways, which is rooted in personal experience of a vital relationship with him' (Harman, p. 19).

This is their real value. You find here flesh and blood people in real life situations facing up to the depravity within them (51), finding forgiveness with God (32), going on to rejoice in him (116), committing themselves to obeying and serving him (25), struggling with prevailing wickedness (37, 73), experiencing spiritual barrenness, doubt and rejection (77), and even facing death (39, 88).

There is no experience common to man that is not echoed in one or more psalms. Moreover, these experiences are not spoken of in a detached clinical way, but are full of emotion, so that whether we are exhilarated or depressed, encouraged or fearful, we will find an echo of our feelings in the psalms. Perhaps there are parts of Scripture that can be managed without; but the Book of Psalms is not one of them. The best way to use them is to meditate on one or part of one every day alongside your daily Bible reading. This will help you to a balanced Christian life.

In order to keep this book within reasonable bounds, theological, ethical and spiritual applications have not been discussed. These are left to the reader to work out, but 'questions' are raised after each Psalm, to indicate the main lines on which you should be thinking.

Psalm 1

Meditating on the Law

The psalm chosen to open the collection roots it firmly in the whole tradition of God's revealed truth, for it is the conviction of one whose *delight is in the law of the* LORD. The Scriptures, or those which existed at the time, were known as *the law of the* LORD, for the word TORAH means more than a code of rules; it is the instruction or knowledge that God has revealed, which is contained in history and wisdom books as well as laws. The psalms are part of this tradition. Although many are personal reflections about individual experience, they are still the word of God.

The justification for this claim lies in the spiritual standing of their writers, who are **the righteous**, so-called because they **delight in** the word of a righteous God. They are clearly distinguished from **the wicked**, who do not. The prayers and complaints come from those who because of their righteousness are opposed by the wicked. The praises are addressed to a righteous God who steps in on behalf of the righteous.

Although written in the third person, we may take this as the writer's personal testimony. He finds his happiness in avoiding the company of the wicked, for the reasons he gives here.

Verse 1: he is rejoicing in his isolation from society. Far from being boring, he finds it a **blessing**. For although Israel was 'God's people', there was little true godliness among them. Many were **wicked, sinners** and even **mockers** at the godly. The writer was glad not to have to put up with their company, and counsels anyone who might hear his song to beware of such.

Verse 2: tells us how he spent his time when there was no one to converse with, possibly because of the nature of his occupation; he spent his time **meditating on the law of the Lord**, which he had been taught as a boy. Since education was done orally by memorization, he would have no difficulty recalling this. Far from being tedious, he found it a **delight**, even when his work kept him awake at **night**.

Verse 3: suggests he was composing his psalm under a **tree by a stream**, which may only have been an irrigation ditch. Nevertheless it kept the tree's **leaf** from scorching in the sun and even enabled it to **yield fruit**. This to him is a good illustration of the character of one who avoids bad company and spends his time thinking about the word of God.

Verse 4 shows him observing agricultural operations, in which he may himself have taken part – the cutting of the corn, or its threshing. What he notices is how easily **the wind blows away the chaff**. This is a good picture of the lives of those whose company he disdains (v. 1) – they are useless and unstable.

Verse 5 goes further: it is a preview of their final appearance before God, when they will be swept away from his presence.

Verse 6 ends on a positive note: he encourages himself and any others who hear or read his words (down to the present time and company) to hold fast to their faith and their faithfulness to God. However difficult this is, they will be glad at the end of the day – and sorry if they follow **the way of the wicked**.

Consider:

(1) How does the psalm help us relate our faith to our daily life, and use our daily routine for the good of our soul?

(2) What does the psalm teach us about the uses of solitude, showing us that loneliness is not the worst thing in the world?

(3) How do verses 4-6 compare with Matthew 7:23?