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THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Introduction

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The book of Psalms, a collection of 150 poems, contains:

- hymns praising God
- laments bemoaning illness, exile, or enemies
- regrets for sins
- reviews of history
- didactic lessons
- prayers for help
- expressions of thanksgiving
- promises to praise God in the future

Many psalms incorporate several of these elements.

The book of Psalms differs from the rest of the Hebrew Bible because most other biblical books (e.g. Torah, Prophets) present divine words proclaimed to humans. However, the book of Psalms contains prayers, human words directed to God. It is not surprising that many psalms were later incorporated into our liturgy.

AUTHORSHIP

According to tradition, King David was the author or editor of the book of Psalms. This tradition was based on the fact that many psalms (e.g., Ps 23) begin with a phrase such as *mizmor leDavid*, usually translated as “Psalm of David.” In addition, the Bible portrays David as a musician (1 Samuel 16), and as a commissioner of Levites to sing songs of praise to God (1 Chronicles 16).

However, it is clear that many of the psalms were written long after the time of King David: some discuss the Temple (built by Solomon after David’s death), and others discuss the Babylonian exile, hundreds of years later. Scholars explain that the phrase *mizmor leDavid* may refer to a psalm of any king of the Davidic line (not just to David). Alternatively, the titles referring to David may have been added by scribes who wanted to legitimize the poems by ascribing them to the great king.

TITLE OF THE BOOK

The English title of the book, Psalms, derives from the Greek word for song (translating the Hebrew word *mizmor* “song”). However, the Hebrew title for the book is *Tehillim*, “praises,” which is from the same root (*heh-lamed-lamed*) as in *hallel* and *hallelujah*. The title *Tehillim* reflects the view that hymns of praise dominate the book, especially the latter part.

