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J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay

Excerpt

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PSALMS

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NAME, CONTENT AND PLACE OF THE BOOK IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The name 'psalms' comes from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Bible via the Latin Vulgate (see *The Making of the Old Testament*, pp. 147–54). The Greek word *psalmos* denoted the twanging of a stringed instrument with the fingers, and later came to mean a song sung to the accompaniment of a plucked instrument. In turn, *psalmos* is a translation of the Hebrew *mizmōr*, which also appears to have denoted both the playing of instruments and the singing of songs. Strictly speaking, then, the title 'psalms' means 'songs'. The name for the book in the Hebrew Bible is *tehillim* or *sēpher tehillim*, meaning 'praises' or 'book of praises'.

In actual fact, neither 'songs' nor 'praises' adequately describes the content of the Psalter. In it, we find expressed by both the individual and the congregation, prayers for help and thanksgivings for deliverance in the face of sickness, despair, desertion by friends, and physical danger. We find hymns of praise to God as creator and judge of the world, as the one who has chosen his people Israel and his dwelling in Zion, and who has guided, supported and punished his people. We find entreaties that God will speedily and effectively establish his rule throughout the world, at the same time that it is acknowledged that he is already the universal king, controlling the forces of nature, and shaping the destinies of the nations. We find prayers for the well-being of the king, and traces of ceremonial used at the king's coronation and the periodic renewal of the divine covenant with the house of David. We find extended meditations on Israel's past history,

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and on God's gracious revelation of his law and his will to his people. We find the whole range of human emotions in their relation to God, from extreme pessimism and doubt to simple and certain trust. Even this lengthy catalogue is not complete, thus showing the impossibility of describing the Psalter and its contents in one word or short phrase. At the end of this introduction, an attempt is made to tabulate the contents of the Psalter.

The psalms stand either in first or second place in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings (see *The Making of the Old Testament*, pp. 118–24). The English Bible has a different order for the books, with Psalms following the Pentateuch and the historical books (including Ruth, Esther and Job). This arrangement derives from the way the books of the Old Testament were grouped together in the early Christian centuries. The underlying principle was probably that the psalms (believed to be substantially by David) should precede the books attributed to Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) which in turn should precede the prophetic books bearing the names of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In other words, these books appear in the order of the historical sequence of the lives of those who were believed to have been their authors.

Although there are 150 psalms, there are two major ways of numbering them, the Hebrew and the Greek. The N.E.B. follows the Hebrew numbering, while among Bibles and commentaries used by Roman Catholics, the Greek numbering has been familiar. The major differences are that Pss. 11–113 and 117–146 in the Hebrew numbering are 10–112 and 116–145 in the Greek numbering, and these differences arose from uncertainty about how to regard the verses contained in Pss. 9, 10, 114, 115, 116 and 147 (according to the Hebrew reckoning). The Greek numbering was almost certainly correct in regarding Pss. 9–10 as one psalm (and note that the N.E.B. regards them as one psalm, numbered 9–10) but it was probably incorrect in regarding Pss. 114 and 115

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Psalms titles, authorship and growth of the Psalter*

as one psalm, and in dividing 116 and 147 each into two psalms. On the other hand, modern scholarship is virtually unanimous in regarding Pss. 42 and 43 as originally one psalm, against both the Hebrew and the Greek numberings.

PSALM TITLES, AUTHORSHIP AND GROWTH
OF THE PSALTER

The preface to the Library Edition of the N.E.B. Old Testament (p. xiv) notes that in the Hebrew, many psalms have titles or headings. The N.E.B. translators decided not to include them in the translation because (i) they are almost certainly not the work of the authors of the psalms, (ii) where they are historical notices they are deduced from the text of the psalm itself and rest on no reliable tradition, and (iii) where they are musical directions, they are mostly unintelligible. However, it is to be noted that the N.E.B. retained the 'doxologies' at the end of Pss. 41, 72, 89 and 106 which mark the conclusion of Books 1-4 of the Psalms respectively, as well as the notice 'Here end the prayers of David son of Jesse' at 72: 20. It can be said of all these that they are no more the work of the authors of the individual psalms than are the psalm titles. Like the titles, they were added at various times as the psalms were collected together to form the Psalter as we have it, and it is odd that in the N.E.B. they were retained where the titles were omitted.

Although the N.E.B. translators are correct in saying that the musical parts of the psalm titles are today unintelligible and that the historical notices are no more than guesses, the titles have something to contribute when we try to deduce how the psalms were collected together. The following psalms are associated with David through the phrase *le dāwīd* in the titles: 3-41 (except 33, and 10 which is a continuation of 9; see above), 51-65, 68-70, 86, 101, 103, 108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138-145. Pss. 42-49, 84-85 and 87-88 are associated with the sons of Korah, while 50 and 73-83 are associated

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[More information](#)*Psalms titles, authorship and growth of the Psalter*

with Asaph. These account for almost all of the 'named' psalms; there are thirty-four nameless or 'orphan' psalms. It will be observed that the 'Davidic' psalms fall predominantly in the first half of the Psalter (fifty-five of Pss. 1-72 are 'Davidic') while the 'orphan' psalms are found mainly in the second half. This may indicate that in the first instance, collections of 'Davidic' psalms were made, and that in the later stages of the compilation of the Psalter, anonymous psalms were added.

The meaning of the Hebrew phrase *le dāwīd* has been much discussed. Traditionally, it was taken to denote Davidic authorship. In modern scholarship, it has often been taken to mean 'belonging to the Davidic collection', while a third view is that the phrase was meant by those who added it, to denote authorship, but that these editors were not guided by any reliable tradition. There is probably some truth in all three of these views.

The Old Testament contains several references to David's skill as a musician and singer (e.g. 1 Sam. 16: 17-23; 2 Sam. 1: 17-27; Amos 6: 5) and it is reasonable to assume that David was the author of some of the psalms, even if we have no means of discovering exactly which. It is also possible that from early times these psalms were headed *le dāwīd*. Later scribes are also likely to have claimed Davidic authorship for psalms by prefacing them with this title, although reliable tradition was lacking. That the phrase *le dāwīd* might also indicate a collection can be argued as follows. Beginning with Ps. 42, we have the Elohist Psalter (Pss. 42-83), so called because an editor or editors seem to have altered the divine name in the psalms from an original 'the LORD' to 'God' (Hebrew *'elōhīm*, thus the term 'Elohistic'). This can be seen if Ps. 14 is compared with Ps. 53 in the English; and the editing is crudely apparent in the Hebrew of Ps. 80, though not in the English translation. This editorial treatment of the divine name begins immediately after the first block of 'Davidic' psalms (3-41), and it is thus reasonable to assume that

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Pss. 3–41 once existed as a separate collection from 42 to 83, because they escaped this editorial work. Further, since all but one of Pss. 3–41 are entitled *le dāwīd*, it is reasonable to say that the title indicates a collection as well as authorship. If we examine the psalms ascribed to the sons of Korah, we see that most of them have an interest in Zion, the temple and worship, from which it is usually concluded that the sons of Korah were a band of temple singers. For the name Asaph, see 1 Chron. 16: 4–7; 2 Chron. 35: 15.

With the help of these points, the following suggestions can be made about the growth of the Psalter. (i) There first existed several separate collections of psalms: two Davidic collections (Pss. 3–41 and 51–72 – cp. 72: 20) probably containing genuine psalms of David and others attributed to him; a Korahite collection (Pss. 42–49, 84–85, 87–88) and an Asaphite collection (Pss. 50, 73–83). (ii) An Elohist Psalter was compiled from three collections – the second Davidic, part of the Korahite, and the Asaphite, to form the group of psalms, 42–83. This collection was subjected to editorial revision in which the divine name ‘the LORD’ was changed to ‘God’ (*’elōhīm*). It is also possible that the Elohist Psalter extended as far as Ps. 88, and that the editorial alteration of the divine name proceeded no further than Ps. 83. (iii) The first Davidic collection and the Elohist Psalter were joined together. (iv) Numerous further additions were made, about which we can only guess. It is probable that Ps. 1 was composed to be the beginning of the whole Psalter, and possible that Ps. 119 at one point marked its conclusion. If this is so, then Pss. 120–134 which are each entitled ‘A song of ascents’ would have been attached as a block following on from Ps. 119, and Pss. 138–145 may have been a small group of Davidic psalms which were added at a late stage to the Psalter. (Pss. 135–137 lack titles, and it is impossible to say why or when they were placed after Pss. 120–134.)

The division of the Psalter into five books (Pss. 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–150) presumably dates from the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*History of interpretation*

time of the completion of the Psalter, probably in the third century B.C. It is usually held that the Psalter was divided into five books on analogy with the five books of the Pentateuch. However, we have already suggested that long before the Psalter was complete, Pss. 3–41 and 42–83 probably existed as separate collections, and in the commentary on Ps. 72, it is suggested that the doxology of 72: 18f. was added to that psalm before the Psalter was divided into books by means of doxologies. Ps. 72: 18f. may have served as the model for the other doxologies.

Although we know so little about how the psalms came to be arranged in their present order, the process may not have been entirely haphazard. Pss. 105 and 106 are clearly complementary, and the unrelieved pessimism of Ps. 88 is immediately followed by the affirmation 'I will sing the story of thy love, O LORD' in 89: 1.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

It has long been recognized that the psalms are rich and varied in content, including praise, prayer and lament. Commentators in all ages have recognized their applicability to many situations in the religious life of the individual and the community, and it is probable that even in the Old Testament period, psalms were reinterpreted in the light of new situations. Thus, Ps. 79, which speaks of enemies defiling Jerusalem and its temple, is never quite explicit enough to enable us to identify the events for certain, and the reason may be that reinterpretation and spiritualizing of the psalm have obscured its references to the events which first called it forth. In 1 Chron. 16: 8–36, parts of Pss. 96, 105, 106 and 107 are quoted in respect of the institution of praise to God by David, after he had brought the Ark to Jerusalem.

Alongside, and not necessarily instead of, what we might call the spiritual interpretation of the psalms, there has been the historical interpretation. Traditional Jewish interpretation

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*History of interpretation*

understood many of the psalms in the context of the life of David, and this approach was expressed already in some of the psalm titles. Thus the title of Ps. 51 reads 'To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba', linking the psalm with the incidents related in 2 Sam. 11-12. When, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, critical scholarship began to abandon belief in the Davidic authorship of the psalms, the historical approach continued, but now, many psalms were understood in the context of the history of ancient Israel. If psalms spoke of Israel or Jerusalem surrounded by enemies, they were referred to the known crises of Israel's history, especially the siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. An extreme form of this approach connected some, or even all of the psalms with events of the Maccabean revolt and the rule of the Hasmonaean dynasty (169-63 B.C.).

In the present century, psalm studies have been dominated by the form-critical and cultic interpretations. The former, associated with the German, Hermann Gunkel, sought to classify the psalms into types according to their formal structure, and then to suggest a context in the religious life of Israel for the types. The latter, associated with the Norwegian, Sigmund Mowinckel, attempted to reconstruct the worship of the Jerusalem temple, especially as it centred around the king, and it was based on material about worship among ancient Israel's neighbours, as well as upon allusions in the psalms themselves. Subsequent scholarship has criticized these pioneering efforts. Gunkel's psalm types have been considerably modified, and doubt has been cast on the validity of some of Mowinckel's reconstructions. However, the work of these scholars has left a permanent mark on the interpretation of the psalms. Classification of psalms into types on the basis of their formal pattern or structure may be subjective, and unconsciously use content as well as form; but it is useful to consider as a group the so-called individual laments (e.g.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The character of the N.E.B. translation*

Pss. 3-7, 13-14, 17, 22, 25-26), the psalms of the kingship of God (Pss. 47, 93, 96-99), or the psalms of Zion (Pss. 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122), to name only three groups. Also, attempts to reconstruct the worship of the Jerusalem temple have drawn attention to important features of ancient Israelite religion, such as the role of the king, and the covenant between God and the house of David.

No commentator, then, can fail to be indebted to the form-critical and cultic approaches to the psalms; but the usefulness of the approaches can be exaggerated. For example, to label a psalm as an individual lament is sometimes to say nothing that could not be observed by an intelligent reader, and further, if psalms are tied too closely to a particular suggested 'original setting', this may obscure the fact that the psalms were certainly reinterpreted within the Old Testament period, and seen in a fuller perspective in later Jewish and Christian interpretation. Also, concentration on the 'original setting' may sometimes make it difficult for the reader to regard a particular psalm as anything more than interesting information about obsolete ceremonies from a remote and alien culture.

In the present commentary, the writers have tried to strike a balance between the spiritual, historical, form-critical and cultic approaches, seeing value in each where appropriate. The writers have also tried to bring out the religious teaching of permanent value which they believe the psalms to contain.

THE CHARACTER OF THE N.E.B. TRANSLATION

For the translator of the Old Testament, the psalms present some major difficulties. First, it is often not clear from a given psalm what exactly it is about; it may be open to two or more interpretations depending on how a difficult Hebrew word or phrase is regarded. Sometimes, the translator will translate a psalm according to a general view of its meaning which he has arrived at not so much by looking at the psalm as a whole, but by studying the difficult Hebrew word or phrase, and

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[More information](#)*The character of the N.E.B. translation*

comparing it with similar phrases elsewhere in the Old Testament or in ancient Near Eastern literature. Alternatively, he may let the content of the psalm as a whole override the way in which he translates a difficult word or phrase. In such cases, translators will not claim absolute certainty for their translation; it will represent the best that they feel they can do in a difficult case.

A second reason for the difficulty in translating the psalms arises from the use and re-use of the psalms in Old Testament times, and later in the synagogue and in the church. The psalms can be understood at so many different levels that really adequate translation is impossible. One result of this is that translations of the psalms have different characters, depending on the general approach adopted by their translators. If one compares Ps. 84 in the N.E.B., the Authorized Version and the Psalter of the Book of Common Prayer, the different characters of these renderings are clearly apparent. The Prayer Book version, dating from 1540, preserves some of the early Christian Greek and Latin interpretations of the psalms, with modifications from continental Reformation sources. It presents Ps. 84 as a description of worship and pilgrimage in such a way that the earthly Jerusalem about which the psalm speaks is a veiled symbol for the heavenly Jerusalem, and the pilgrimage to Zion is a symbol for that pilgrimage which is the whole of the religious life of an individual. The Authorized Version is much more literal, and in its attempt to give a faithful rendering of the Hebrew, it sometimes produces nonsense, as in verse 5, where it has 'Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them.' On a superficial reading, the Authorized Version conveys less than the Prayer Book version. The N.E.B. adopts the view that the psalm was sung in connection with a pilgrimage to Zion in ancient Israel. It achieves a consistency of interpretation with the occasional help of a radical treatment of the Hebrew text, but unlike the Prayer Book version, allows no hints that the psalm could be seen in a wider perspective.

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[More information](#)*Literary and poetic characteristics of the psalms*

The difference between these translations of Ps. 84 is not that one is more 'correct' than the others. At one or two points, the N.E.B. is doubtless more correct from the point of view of Hebrew than the Prayer Book version, but at the same time the N.E.B. contains some conjectures that are at best only possibilities. The proper way to assess a translation is to examine it in the light of its overall approach, and in the case of the N.E.B., this approach seems to have been to render the psalms according to what the translators believed to be the setting of individual psalms in the life of ancient Israel.

Because in the present commentary the writers have sought to see the psalms in a wider perspective than their suggested original setting in ancient Israel, they have regarded the N.E.B. as a witness to the original Hebrew, but they have felt free to criticize the N.E.B. translation, and to draw attention to more traditional approaches to interpretation, where they have felt that the N.E.B. implies too narrow a view, or a misleading interpretation.

LITERARY AND POETIC CHARACTERISTICS
OF THE PSALMS

The psalms are poetry, and they employ several literary devices. Some of these characteristics are apparent, even in translation. Nine psalms, 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 and 145, are acrostic psalms, in which individual lines or verses, or groups of verses, begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Possibly, the psalmists regarded Hebrew as a special language because in it God had allowed his law and the record of his mighty deeds to be written. The alphabet perhaps symbolized the whole of the Hebrew language, and so, in composing psalms in which verses began with each successive letter of the alphabet, the psalmists were reminding themselves of the marvellous fact that the oracles of God had been recorded in Hebrew. The acrostic principle is at its most