

An INTRODUCTION to the Book of Psalms (part III)

I. Classification

1. Two methods have been employed to classify or group the psalms. They are grouping by CONTENT and by FUNCTION. The method of grouping by Content is older and even after the rise of form-critical scholarship, it remains a useful method.
2. GROUPING BY CONTENT -- S R Driver listed seven rubrics that are helpful which are based upon the content of the psalms.¹ They are:
 - a) Meditations on various aspects of divine providence, e.g. Psalms 8; 19:1-6; 33; 36.
 - b) Reflections on God's moral government of the world, e.g. Psalms 1; 34; 75; 77; 90.
 - c) Expressions of faith, resignation, joy in God's presence, e.g. Psalms 11; 16; 23; 84; 121; 133; 139.
 - d) Psalms with distinct references to the circumstances of the psalmist, e.g. Psalms 3-7; 9-10; 12; 30; 40:1-12.
 - e) National Psalms, e.g. Psalms 14; 44; 46; 60; 74; 79; 87; 124-26.
 - f) Historical Psalms, e.g. Psalms 78; 81; 105-6; 114.
 - g) Royal Psalms, e.g. Psalms 2; 18; 20; 101; 110.

Other recognized classifications under the grouping of Content are Messianic, wisdom, imprecatory, Psalms of praise, etc.

3. GROUPING BY FUNCTION -- This grouping is done by identifying the type or genre of the psalm and tracing it back to its origin in the life of Israel. The rudimentary pursuit focused on the "setting in life" (*Sitz im Leben*), that is, the situation that brought the particular psalm into existence. (Bullock, 120)

"Herman Gunkel² pioneered this method and insisted that the important question was not the historical background but the function of the song in the life of Israel." (Bullock, 120) For example, he believes that Psalm 24 was chanted at the gates of the Temple as the Ark was returned from battle. This is difficult to prove with certainty.

Gunkel proposed seven types or classes:

¹S R Driver, **An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament**, first printing 1897, (Cleveland: World Publishers, reprint 1956), 368-9.

²For a synopsis of Herman Gunkel's thought, see **The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction**, translated by Thomas M. Horner, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

- a) Hymns, sung on holy days at the Temple;
- b) Community laments, chanted by the people when disaster had struck;
- c) Songs of the individual, sung by pious persons;
- d) Thank offering songs, sung by one who had been delivered from great distress, and accompanied by a thank offering;
- e) Laments of the individual, intoned by one who had suffered physical or emotional affliction;
- f) Entrance liturgies, chanted by those who desired to enter the place of worship; and
- g) Royal psalms, sung in honour of the king.

Gunkel's method was developed by his protege, Sigmund Mowinckel. This method may be used if one is certain of the *Sitz im Leben* behind that psalm. However, it is not possible to apply this method to ALL the psalms and determine their liturgical purposes.

Knowing the situation in life that caused the psalm to be written is helpful in that one can ascertain the reason behind the writing of the psalm. This is similar to knowing the problem behind the writing of many of Paul's epistles, which helps us to better understand that particular epistle. However, unlike the epistles, the problems can be carefully and clearly determined from the epistles themselves but not so in most of the psalms. The *Sitz im Leben* is not mentioned and not all of them are for liturgical functions.

II. Titles

1. Out of the 150 psalms in the Bible, only 34 of them have no titles or superscriptions.³ The Septuagint (LXX - Greek translation of the Old Testament) has titles for all the psalms except Psalms 1 and 2.
2. The following are five categories among the titles in the Hebrew (and English) Bible that we can distinguish:
 - a) Authorship
 - b) Historical origin -- there are only thirteen of these in all the psalms. All of them refer to David's life and experiences.⁴
 - c) Literary feature -- it means words that describe the literary character of the psalm. Terms like *maschil*, *michtam*, *shiggaion*, prayer, and praise.

³These psalms are: 1, 2, 10, 33, 43, 71, 91, 93-97, 104-7, 111-19, 135-37, 146-50.

⁴David's conflict with Saul -- Psalms 7, 34, 52, 56, 57, 59, 142; culmination of his reign -- Psalm 18; Syrian-Ammonite war -- Psalm 60; adultery with Bathsheba -- Psalm 51; flight from Absalom -- Psalms 3, 63; and dedication of David's house -- Psalm 30.

- d) Liturgical use -- e.g. Psalm 92 -- a psalm used for the Sabbath day. Other liturgical notes appear but they are not specific. They are: "to bring to remembrance"-- Psalms 38-70; "a psalm of thanksgiving"-- Ps 100; and "a song of ascents" -- Psalms 120-134. The LXX notes that Psalm 24 (LXX, 23) was used on the first day of the week; Psalm 48 (LXX, 47) on the second, Psalm 94 (LXX, 93) on the fourth, and Psalm 93 (LXX, 92) on the sixth. Do not confuse the superscription found in the psalms (Hebrew Bible) with those found in the LXX. Those found in the LXX are suggestions. Those found in the Hebrew Bible of the psalms are part of inspired Scriptures.
- e) Musical notations -- The phrase, "to the chief musicians" is prefixed to 55 psalms and seems to suggest that these were used in the Temple services. Hab 3:19 has the similar phrase as a subscript.