ENCOUNTERING *the* BOOK OF PSALMS

A LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

SECOND EDITION

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To the memory of
Rev. Britts E. and Mrs. Lucinda R. Nichols,
my father-in-law and mother-in-law,
who lived in the spirit of the Psalms.

"Blessed in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful servants."
Psalm 116:15

Contents

To the Student

Encountering the book of Psalms in a systematic way for the first time is an exciting experience. It can also be overwhelming because there is so much to learn. You need to learn not only the content of this book of songs but also important background information about the world in which the songwriters lived.

The purpose of this textbook is to make that encounter a little less daunting. To accomplish this, a number of learning aids have been incorporated into the text. I suggest you familiarize yourself with this textbook by reading the following introductory material, which explains what learning aids have been provided.

Sidebars

Sidebars isolate contemporary issues of concern and show how the book of Psalms speaks to these pressing ethical and theological issues.

Chapter Outlines

At the beginning of each chapter is a brief outline of the chapter's contents. *Study Suggestion*: Before reading the chapter, take a few minutes to read the outline. Think of it as a road map, and remember that it is easier to reach your destination if you know where you are going.

Chapter Objectives

A brief list of objectives is placed at the outset of each chapter. These present the tasks you should be able to perform after reading the chapter. *Study Suggestions*: Read the objectives carefully before beginning to read the text. As you read the text, keep these objectives in mind and take notes to help you remember what you have read. After reading the chapter, return to the objectives to see whether you can perform the tasks.

Key Terms and Glossary

Key terms have been identified throughout the text by the use of **boldface** type. This will alert you to important words or phrases you may not be familiar with. Definitions of these words will be found at the end of the book in an alphabetical glossary. *Study Suggestion*: When you encounter a key term in

the text, stop and read the definition before continuing through the chapter.

Study Questions

A few discussion questions have been provided at the end of each chapter, and these can be used to review for examinations. *Study Suggestion*: Write suitable answers to the study questions in preparation for tests.

Further Reading

A helpful bibliography for supplementary reading is presented at the end of the book. *Study Suggestion*: Use this list to explore areas of special interest.

Visual Aids

A host of illustrations have been included in this textbook. Each illustration has been carefully selected, and each is intended to make the text not only more aesthetically pleasing but also more easily mastered.

May your encounter with the book of Psalms be an exciting adventure!

Preface to the Second Edition

Reading the Psalms is like looking into a mirror. We see so many emotions, circumstances, and dilemmas that we human beings face, our own profile, no less. And the Psalms are not only a reflection of the human challenges, but they also tell us so much about how the psalmists dealt with those challenges in the light of their faith in a covenant-keeping God and how God never tired of reaffirming his commitment to creation and those who "fear his name."

With this recognition, I express my gratitude to those teachers and students who have used the first edition of *Encountering the Book of Psalms* and, by their usage, invoked the publisher's invitation to issue this new edition. That leads naturally to my thanks to Jim Kinney, executive vice president for academic publishing at Baker Publishing Group, for issuing this invitation and to the editorial expertise of Brian Bolger and his staff. Also along with the kind reception of the first edition by the readership is the completion of my two-volume commentary in the Teach the Text series (Baker Books, 2015, 2017), necessitating the need to bring these two works into a coordinate relationship.

As the reader will note, my approach to the Psalms reflects the canonical method, which has opened up new and stimulating vistas on this timeless collection of spiritual poems. As I continue to teach the Psalms in the Wheaton College Graduate School, I am encouraged by those students who find that this method provides them with a new perspective on the Psalter. I sincerely hope that the readers of this volume will have a similar experience as they discover its usefulness in opening up new insights about the psalmists themselves, about their personal and historical circumstances, and about their spiritual program for finding solutions and ultimately entering into a more mature relationship with God. David's passionate yearning is the model of the Psalter, often expressed as being in the "presence/house of the Lord" (Ps. 23:5). Indeed, the goal of the saving message of Scripture generally is that we might acquire the passion and learn the spiritual program that will lead us into the Lord's presence, both in this life and in the life to come (Ps. 16:11). To that end this work is intended to be for the glory of God alone—*soli Deo gloria!*

Wheaton, Illinois
January 30, 2017

Preface to the First Edition

No collection of poems has ever exercised as much influence on the Western world as the book of Psalms. Even though Christianity has accepted the Hebrew Old Testament as the authentic Word of God, none of its books have functioned so ecumenically as the Psalms. The Christian hermeneutic differs from the Jewish, admittedly, particularly in the Christian emphasis upon the messianic nature of the Psalms, but if Christian and Jew can meet and stand on level ground at all, they come closer to that stance when they approach the Psalms than with any other book of the Old Testament. If we Christians have, to our shame, imposed an inferiority complex on certain books of the Hebrew Bible, the Psalms have gratefully escaped this misfortune. The mystery of this phenomenon is in part the human element that pervades these spiritual poems. They are replete with evidences of the human situation with all its complexities. Wherever we are on the spectrum of human achievement or failure, we can find ourselves somewhere in this book. Wherever we are on the spectrum of human life, be it youth or full maturity or declining health or the throes of death, there is a niche in this book that provides reflection upon our condition.

There is another side to this mystery that lies in the pale of divine providence, beyond the domain of human reason. There God has empowered us for living and embellished our lives with a grace that exceeds our understanding. We draw upon this grace *by* grace, and by it are refurbished in life and reminded that, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, "I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." The Psalms infuse us with strength beyond our human powers because the God of the psalmists—and of us—hovers over them in love and mercy. They are his dwelling place, and there he meets us and we him.

The Psalms are as difficult to interpret as any book of the Old Testament. Because there are so many human paths that we may walk down as we read the Psalms, the temptation is to assume that we can make our own paths and thus require the Psalms to authorize our ways. But the Psalms cannot mean all things to all people, despite their assorted thoughts and emotions. The historical element remains the control that draws a circle

around the interpreter and restricts him or her within a method that does not permit a mere reader-response hermeneutic. Yet the Psalms will speak on levels of meaning that may be more a tributary than the main stream of the text. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" (Ps. 23:4a ESV) is probably a good illustration of this. Who would deny that this text has comforted millions in the hour of death, and who would deny its comfort yet to millions more! Historically speaking, it probably was a reference to some place and time in David's life before he faced the ultimate moment, when it seemed that an untimely death was approaching; but spiritually speaking, it says far more than that. Indeed, we can put our ultimate moment of life in light of this historical experience, whatever shape it took for David, and sense that the Almighty is walking through this valley with us.

If any book of the Bible requires every resource we have and can acquire in order to interpret it properly, the Psalms require no less and possibly more. We must have *lived* in the hamlets of human existence before the Psalms can speak to us in all their power. If we could combine resplendent words, profound emotions, and heavenly music into a single language, then we could begin to hear the Psalms in their richness and perhaps begin to expound them with some degree of adequacy. Indeed, that will always be our aim.

To take my cue from the Psalms and express my gratitude to all of those who have contributed to the various dimensions of this book, I say:

> I am under vows to you, my God;
> I will present my thank offerings to you. (Ps. 56:12)

So as I present them to God, I do it as a public offering of gratitude. They are not in order of ascending or descending gratefulness, for genuine gratitude is a virtue of equal quality wherever it is found, even though its quantity may range up and down the scale. My "thank offerings" go to the board of trustees of Wheaton College, who gave me a sabbatical to work on this manuscript at Tyndale House in Cambridge, England, in the fall of 1999; to the staff of Tyndale House, who made my work there one of the great study pleasures of my life; to my wife, Rhonda, who shared the experience with me and who loves the Psalms as I do; to the Parkview Presbyterian Church of Oak Park, which gave me time away from my pastoral duties to concentrate on my sabbatical project; to the Rev. Loy Mershimer, who responsibly and capably assumed those duties on my behalf and just as capably prepared the key terms and study questions for the book; to the Aldeen Fund of Wheaton College, which underwrote some of the bibliographical work of this writing project; to the Franklin S. Dyrness Chair at Wheaton College, in which I sit with honor and gratitude, and to the memory of the revered servant of Christ for whom it is named; to my friend and faithful bibliographer, Don Patrick, who did all of the bibliographical footwork for this book, and did it with enthusiasm and passion; to the Rev. James Scott, friend and former student, who read several chapters of the manuscript and offered his perceptive insights and suggestions; to Daniel Balint, my former teacher's assistant, called into service again, who read the manuscript with more than an editor's eye and assisted in constructing the sidebars; to my daughter, Becky, who prepared the bibliography for me; to Professor Eugene Merrill, the Old Testament editor of this series, who encouraged me in both the preliminary and the developing stages; to my colleague and the New Testament editor of this series, Professor Walter Elwell, whose encouragement has always been waiting for me down the hallway from

my faculty office; to Baker Book House and former editor James Weaver, who makes his writers feel that writer and publisher are one and the same in purpose—to all of these I fulfill my vows before the gracious God of the Psalms and present to him my thank offering in the form of this manuscript. As John Calvin said of his own commentary on the Psalms, I would like also to say of this work:

> If the reading of these my Commentaries confer as much benefit on the Church of God as I myself have reaped advantage from the composition of them, I shall have no reason to regret that I have undertaken this work.[1]

And now I humbly dedicate this book to the memory of my father- and mother-in-law, Rev. Britts E. and Mrs. Lucinda R. Nichols, who lived their lives and served the church in the faith of the psalmists, trusting the God of this book until their triumphant transfer to glory. My father-in-law made his transfer on Palm Sunday of 1992 while we, in our church in Oak Park, Illinois, were acclaiming his Lord and ours with David's words, hundreds of miles away from his hospital room:

> "Hosanna to the Son of David!"
> "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
> "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matt. 21:9/Ps. 118:26)

Surely his praise and ours united as he made his triumphal entry into the heavenly Jerusalem. My mother-in-law made hers in October of 1999 as Rhonda and I recited Psalms 23 and 121 at her bedside. Their lives have touched mine in ways that have made the Psalms all the more meaningful. So in the words of the Jewish benediction, "May the memory of the righteous be for a blessing."

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
Ps(s).	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jon.	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Rom.	Romans

1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1 Pet.	1 Peter
2 Pet.	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

PART
1

Encountering the Literary and Hermeneutical Dimensions of the Psalms

1

"Begin the Music"

Introducing the Psalms

Outline

- **Names of the Book**
- **Nature of the Book**
- **Place of the Book in the Canon**
- **David's Place in the Book**
- **Titles of the Psalms and Special Terms**
  - Author Attributed Titles
  - Historical Titles
  - Titles Indicating Literary or Musical Genre
  - Titles with Musical Terms
  - Titles with Musical Tunes
- **Musical Instruments**
- **Singing**

Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

1. Give the names of the book of Psalms.
2. Discuss the nature of the book.
3. Summarize the place of the book in the canon.
4. Assess David's role in the composition of the Psalms.
5. Discuss the titles of the psalms and other special terms.

On some religious festival the congregation of Israel waited expectantly in the sanctuary to begin their worship, summoned perhaps by the musician or a priest to "sing" and "begin the music":

> Sing for joy to God our strength;
> shout aloud to the God of Jacob!
> Begin the music, strike the timbrel,
> play the melodious harp and lyre.
> Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon,
> and when the moon is full, on the
> day of our festival;
> this is a decree for Israel,
> an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
> (Ps. 81:1–4)

Tehillim

It is rare in the Bible to have such a vivid picture of worship with its musical accompaniments as we have here in Psalm 81. The musical setting sets the stage for the awesome sermon that follows in verses 6–16. It is a succinct summary of Israel's history. In fact, one could cut this page out of Israel's national journal and have a synopsis of God's action that brought Israel into being (vv. 6–10), along with Israel's unfortunate response (vv. 11–16).

mizmor

The book of Psalms is a record of God's call and of his people's response, enacted a thousand times in history. The Psalms are like a spiritual photograph album of ancient Israel in its relationship to God and a mirror of our own relationship and response to God, who summons his people and promises his presence and secures their future. Any time we try to interpret the Psalms, a journal of Israel's life—so filled with joys and sorrows, inscribed with aspirations and failures—we will find ourselves experiencing a catharsis of the soul.

But before we imbibe deeply of the spiritual riches of the Psalms, we need to deal with some pedestrian matters that will orient us to our study and augment our understanding of those treasures.

Names of the Book

The Hebrew title of this book is appropriately ***Tehillim*** ("praises"), for praise is a central feature of the poems that comprise this collection. Yet interestingly, although this word in its singular form (*tehillah*, "praise") occurs many times in the psalms themselves, it only occurs once as a title of an individual psalm (Ps. 145, "Praise of David"), suggesting that it came to be used as a "type" of psalm later in the history of the Psalter.

The major Greek versions rendered another Hebrew word, ***mizmor*** ("song"), as *psalmos*, which is found often in the titles of individual psalms, and this term gave the book its title *Psalmoi* ("Psalms"). This was the title by which the New Testament writers knew the book (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20). The common English title, of course, is "The Psalms," and we readily see its derivation from the Greek versions.

Another popular English title, "Psalter," comes from Alexandrinus, a fifth-century AD copy of the Greek translation known as the Septuagint, which called the book *Psaltērion*, meaning "stringed instrument."[1] The word actually occurs several times in the Greek text of the Psalms, where it generally translates the Hebrew word *kinnor* ("lyre") and sometimes *nevel* ("lyre"). Alexandrinus elevates this word to the title of the book.

Nature of the Book

The book of Psalms is a diversified collection of sacred poems. While we shall not attempt a description of these poems at this point, the book is an anthology of prayers, worship songs, and poems sung and chanted in public and private worship. The psalmists spoke on their own behalf as well as Israel's. Perhaps not all of the Psalms were sung in the temple, but some were definitely written for that purpose. Others were likely written for private use and some of them subsequently adapted for public worship. The book, whose composition spans several centuries, was thus a repository of public and private faith.

It is only logical then that in the history of Israel and the Christian church the Psalms have had extensive use in both public and private worship,[2] which is very much a reflection of the original purpose of these sacred poems. John Calvin, one of the great commentators on the book, found the Psalms to be a guide for life. He remarked that "in considering the whole course of the life of David, it seemed to me that by his own footsteps he showed me the way, and from this I have experienced no small consolation."[3] Even when David took a wrong turn in the road, he showed us the way we ought not go and then the way to return to the main path (e.g., Ps. 51). There is no book of the Bible that affords such spiritual catharsis as the book of Psalms. Calvin acknowledges this when he calls the book "an anatomy of all parts of the soul."[4]

Place of the Book in the Canon

The book of Psalms is contained in the third division of the Hebrew Bible, the **Writings** (*Ketuvim*), known in Greek as the Hagiographa. By their varied nature the Psalms belong in this section of the Hebrew Bible, since, in the strictest sense of the terms, they are neither Torah nor prophecy. They have, of course, elements of both. It is rather interesting that some commentators have seen a strong prophetic character in the Psalms. Perhaps that is because the psalmists are interpreters of Israel's spiritual life, and thus a prophetic strain runs through their words. Calvin referred to the psalmists as prophets,[5] and Brevard Childs, commenting on Psalms 89 and 132, recognized the prophetic model that came to characterize much of the Psalter: "To be sure, the psalmist has developed this tradition along different lines from the prophet, but increasingly the prophetic model poured its content into the idiom of the psalmist."[6]

In fact, Childs recognized that the major thrust of the collection was prophetic in that the Psalms announced the kingdom of God: "The Psalter in its canonical form, far from being different in kind from the prophetic message, joins with the prophets in announcing God's coming kingship."[7] We might say that the Psalter was the repository of the prophetic spirit and the archive of the prophetic hope.

David's Place in the Book

Modern scholarship has raised serious questions about David's role in writing the Psalms. Some insist that he wrote all of the seventy-three psalms attributed to him, while others doubt that he wrote many, if any. Those who fall somewhere in between acknowledge that he could have written some of them, perhaps a significant number.

The Talmud attributes all of the Psalms to David.[8] While only seventy-three psalms actually carry the notation that he was the poet, or that certain psalms are "dedicated" to him, they do so in the larger setting of the

Writings *(Ketuvim)*

poetic reputation that the books of Samuel and Chronicles lay out for us. The writer of Samuel paints a portrait of David the musician, first as one who plays the lyre (*kinnor*, 1 Sam. 16:14–23), and then as one who composes psalms. The writer of Samuel records David's lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:17–27), a poem that has much in common with the laments of the Psalms. However, it is person specific, mentioning both Saul and Jonathan by name, whereas the psalmic laments are not so specific. This lament, according to the superscription, was contained in the Book of Jashar, evidently an ancient collection of poetry. The one other reference to that book is the notation that Joshua's famous words upon his defeat of the Amorites (these are also poetry) were also included in it (Josh. 10:12–13). The literary link between David's poetry outside the Psalms and the poetry within, however, is best represented by his song of praise "when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul" (2 Sam. 22), which is essentially a duplicate of Psalm 18. The other poetic composition attributed to David in Samuel is the Last Words of David, recorded in 2 Samuel 23:1–7 but not contained in the Psalter. Thus the psalmic associations with David are well attested in the books of Samuel.

Written after the Judean kingdom had passed into history, the books of Chronicles also take this information very seriously. Still in that late time, or, perhaps we should say, especially in that late period, David's musical legacy was lodged in the national memory. Thus David took his place alongside the priests as founder of the musical tradition of the temple. He assigned musical duties to the Levites (2 Chron. 23:18; see Ezra 3:10), directed the manufacture of musical instruments for the temple (1 Chron. 23:5; 2 Chron. 7:6; 29:26), and designated the times when the Levites were to perform certain musical duties.

One might argue against Samuel and Chronicles regarding David's musical role in the temple and contend that it was the result of layers of tradition mounting up in David's column. Yet, his reputation was obviously an enormous one, and his portrait, painted with such careful and personal details in the books of Samuel, was not likely an invention of Israel's imagination. Therefore, the general setting of David's life and long reign as laid out in Samuel and followed by the Chronicler gives a generous touch of realism to the strong association of David with the book of Psalms.

There is another aspect of David's contribution to the Psalms that we need to understand, a contribution created by the editors of the book rather than by David himself, but nevertheless a genuine "Davidic" endowment. We can call it the "rhetorical" role of David in the Psalms.[9] That means the compilers of the book of Psalms have used full Davidic psalms, quotations from Davidic psalms, superscribed attributions of certain psalms to David, and historical events (e.g., Psalm 132, the Davidic covenant and the transfer of the ark) to draw from the ambience of David's life, work, and piety in such a way to give the reader a Davidic voice-over. This is obvious in many places, but I will give only one instance. In Book 5 (Pss. 107–50) the compiler includes a Davidic cadre of psalms with the inscription "to/for/by David" in the final collection (Pss. 138–45) to speak to the exiles who have returned from Babylonia and are engaged in rebuilding the community and the temple (some would date this collection in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah in the fifth century BC). David's reputation relating to the sanctuary and his piety and love for his people are reasons that this era of history needed to hear their revered king speak

words of hope and comfort to them. Some of these psalms may indeed be Davidic in origin, but others are probably adapted for the purpose of introducing David's voice as the final voice of hope before the community and summoning all believers to the ultimate praise of Yahweh in Psalms 146–50.[10] (Note David's call to "every creature" to join him in praise of Yahweh in Ps. 145:21.)

Titles of the Psalms and Special Terms

In this section we will consider the special terms that occur in the Psalms, so that we may understand, as best as our current knowledge will allow, the fuller dimensions of the book.

With the rise of form criticism, the study of the Psalms' titles became a secondary matter, and the form critics generally assumed the titles were late and could be ignored as having little significant meaning in the interpretation of the Psalms. However, a more intentional effort has been made in recent years to understand the role of the titles in the study of the Psalms. Just when were the titles added to the Psalms? Were any of them original? What did the composer or the editor who prefixed the titles intend by them? Or how was the editor(s) who added them trying to enhance these psalms? These are difficult questions. While some of the titles, perhaps most, may have been added long after the composition of the psalms, they nevertheless were not a haphazard exercise.

But even though a logical connection has to be assumed between a given title and the psalm, it is often difficult for us to see. This is particularly noticeable in the thirteen historical titles. While pieces of the historical situation may be discernible, and certain verses may qualify as assessments of or reflections on that experience, the connection may still not be as obvious as we would like. As the centuries have passed, the meaning of these titles has often become obscure. Even by the time of the Greek translation (ca. second century BC), the translators were often stumped by them and could only make a guess at their meaning, or at best, transliterate them. As research continues and the titles remain the object of serious study, perhaps we will eventually know much more about their meaning. Yet, unfortunately, the meaning of some of the terms may remain forever murky.

Author Attributed Titles

The authorship question is difficult because we cannot be absolutely sure how to read some of the superscriptions in which individuals are mentioned, nor can we be sure that the titles were original to the psalms themselves. One term is the simple preposition "to," "by," or "of" (Hebrew *le*). Archaeologists have identified this term on many jar handles found in Israel, where it designates the owner of the jar, "belonging to . . ." This is not quite the same, of course, as finding a poem with the same designation. In this latter context, it could mean "to," in the sense of dedication to that individual, or "by," carrying the nuance of authorship. Based upon the information of the books of Samuel and Chronicles, we may understand the term in many instances in the authorial sense, but the decision may also turn in the direction of "dedicated to." In the Psalms this preposition is prefixed to the names of David, Solomon, Moses, Asaph, the sons of Korah, and the two Ezrahites, Ethan and Heman. It is a bit difficult to ignore all of these associations and deny that any of them are authorial. At the same time, to put David in a category by himself and deny his compositional role while allowing others is hardly a defensible view either,[11] even though we may admit that

Table 1.1

Author Attributed Titles in the Psalms

	Book 1 (1–41)	Book 2 (42–72)	Book 3 (73–89)	Book 4 (90–106)	Book 5 (107–50)
Moses				Ps. 90	
David	Pss. 3–32 (taking 9 and 10 as a single psalm), 34–41	Pss. 51–65, 68–71 (taking 70 and 71 as a single psalm)	Ps. 86	Pss. 101, 103	Pss. 108–10, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138–45
Solomon		Ps. 72			Ps. 127
Asaph		Ps. 50	Pss. 73–83		
Sons of Korah		Pss. 42–49 (taking 42 and 43 as a single psalm)	Pss. 84–85, 87–88 (both "sons of Korah" and "Heman" in Ps. 88)		
Heman			Ps. 88 (both "sons of Korah" and "Heman")		
Ethan			Ps. 89		
No attribution	Pss. 1–2, 33	Pss. 66–67		Pss. 91–100, 102, 104–6	Pss. 107, 111–21, 123, 125–26, 128–30, 132, 134–37, 146–50

the titles are in many instances later than the original composition of the psalms.

Some scholars have resorted to a literary explanation of the term, asserting that "to/by/of David" is merely literary convention designating a particular quality of poetry.[12] However, it is not easy to define precisely what that quality is. So this must remain a rather arbitrary hypothesis.

As table 1.1 shows, many of the psalms have no names attached to them at all. The highest concentration of these (twenty-eight) are in Book 5 (Pss. 107–50), but we should note that Book 5 also contains fifteen David psalms, which counterbalance Book 5 against the heavily Davidic Book 1 (Pss. 1–41). Perhaps this concentration of anonymous psalms suggests that Book 5 is more conscious of the underlying historical circumstances of the postexilic period, when there was a great need to encourage and expound certain themes, such as "law" (*torah*) and Yahweh's "love" (*hesed*) and "faithfulness" (*'emet*) (Exod. 34:6). Perhaps this concentration of anonymous psalms suggests that the activity of psalm writing had become quite broad and a common practice. Obviously the names that appear in the headings are noteworthy individuals or groups in ancient Israel. Quite interestingly, Book 5 contains the names of only two historical persons, David and Solomon, probably because of the prominence of the rebuilding of the temple in Book 5.

Historical Titles

Thirteen psalms have superscriptions that contain historical information: Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, and 142. A look at table 1.2 will show that all of these psalms are Davidic and that each refers to some instance in or information about his life. While some interpreters of the Psalms handily dispose of these historical titles with a dismissive word, the Davidic association has a legitimizing effect on the psalms over

Table 1.2

Historical Titles of the Psalms and Their Related Historical Texts

Ps. 3	Ps. 7	Ps. 18	Ps. 34	Ps. 51	Ps. 52
A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom. (2 Sam. 15:13–31)	A *shiggaion* of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning Cush, a Benjamite. (2 Sam. 16; nothing is known of Cush, but David had enemies among the Benjamites. See 2 Sam. 16:5–9; 20:1.)	For the director of music. Of David the servant of the LORD. He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said: (2 Sam. 22:1–51 [duplicate of Ps. 18])	Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left. (1 Sam. 21:10–14)	For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. (2 Sam. 11–12)	For the director of music. A *maskil* of David. When Doeg the Edomite had gone to Saul and told him, "David has gone to the house of Ahimelek." (1 Sam. 22:6–23)

Ps. 54	Ps. 56	Ps. 57	Ps. 59	Ps. 60	Ps. 63	Ps. 142
For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A *maskil* of David. When the Ziphites had gone to Saul and said, "Is not David hiding among us?" (1 Sam. 23:19; 26:1)	For the director of music. To the tune of "A Dove on Distant Oaks." Of David. A *miktam*. When the Philistines had seized him in Gath. (1 Sam. 21:11–16)	For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." Of David. A *miktam*. When he had fled from Saul into the cave. (1 Sam. 22:1)	For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." Of David. A *miktam*. When Saul had sent men to watch David's house in order to kill him. (1 Sam. 19:11–17)	For the director of music. To the tune of "The Lily of the Covenant." A *miktam* of David. For teaching. When he fought Aram Naharaim and Aram Zobah, and when Joab returned and struck down twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt. (2 Sam. 8:13–14)	A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah. (1 Sam. 23:14; 24:1)	A *maskil* of David. When he was in the cave. A prayer. (1 Sam. 22:1; 24:1–7)

which such titles appear. While acknowledging the paucity of information, Leslie McFall suggests that a superscription was put on a psalm as soon as it was composed. He points to Hezekiah's psalm in Isaiah 38 and Habakkuk's psalm in Habakkuk 3. Moreover, we have superscribed notes for six compositions in the book of Proverbs, which seem to be integral to those compositions (Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1).[13]

Just how close in time to David's life the historical titles were added to the psalms is impossible to tell, but they represent an effort to clothe the psalms in historical garb. Whether they were composed with the psalms or were the work of a later editor, these titles suggest the importance of history for the writers and editors of the Psalter. So we are not free to ignore the historical dimensions of the Psalms, for not only are they suggested by these titles, but the psalms are replete with historical references and allusions. In addition, the five books are collected against the background of certain historical eras, again pointing in the direction of the significance of history to the compilers of the Psalter. See "Reading the Psalms from the Editors' Perspective" in chapter 2.

Titles Indicating Literary or Musical Genre

Other titles fall into the literary or musical category and suggest some literary form or

musical notation. Unfortunately, certainty about the meaning of some of these terms can no longer be achieved, but we will discuss the more generally accepted understandings.

shir

miktam

1. *Song (**shir**)*. In the book of Psalms, as would be expected, this term occurs in reference to songs performed, most likely, in the temple. However, it also had a secular usage (Prov. 25:20; Eccles. 7:5). It seems to suggest a vocal rather than an instrumental rendering. This word occurs in conjunction with other words. One such connection is with the Hebrew word *mizmor* (psalm). The difference between these two words may be that "song" (*shir*) is vocal and "psalm" (*mizmor*) is accompanied by a musical instrument.[14] When used together they would suggest accompanied singing. Another connection occurs in the headings for Psalms 120–34, and the phrase is usually translated "song of ascents" (*shir hamma'aloth*). It is generally believed that these psalms from the Second Temple period were sung on special pilgrimages to Jerusalem. This may be suggested by the use of the verb "go up" in Ezra 2:1 and a noun derived from the verb in Ezra 7:9, both describing the "going up" from the Babylonian exile. Later the term applied to the fifteen temple steps leading up to the temple proper, where the temple singers sang these psalms, one on each step. Some would, in fact, translate this phrase as "songs of the steps."
2. *Psalm (mizmor)*. As already stated, this word, used fifty-seven times as a technical term in the Psalter,[15] suggests a musical form. As a verb it means to play a musical instrument. In fact, in four of its verbal occurrences in the Psalms the musical instrument is specified (Pss. 33:2; 98:5; 144:9; 147:7). Thus, the meaning of the noun is a poetic form intended for musical accompaniment. In the Septuagint (LXX) this word is normally rendered as *psalmos*, from which we get our word "psalm."
3. ***Miktam***. There is no consensus on the meaning of this term, so the translations usually render it in transliterated form as we have done here. It occurs in the titles of Psalms 16, 56, 57, 58, 59, and 60, which are all Davidic psalms. Rashi proposes that it suggests a literary style, and Delitzsch makes a similar proposition, pointing out that two literary features are discernible: (1) important expressions are sometimes introduced by "he spoke," "and he said," and "I said"; and (2) some of these expressions are used as a refrain (Pss. 56:4, 11; 57:5, 11; 59:9b–10a, 17).[16] B. D. Eerdmans also offers an attractive interpretation, even though it too is hypothetical. He proposes that, in view of the perilous situations the titles of these psalms allude to, the word suggests the covering of the lips in secrecy. So "a silent prayer" might be the best translation, for David could not have prayed a prayer out loud in any of these situations.[17] We may also note that prayers were normally spoken aloud, so a silent prayer would need a notation to that effect.
4. ***Maskil***. This term too is generally transliterated because there is no consensus on its meaning. It occurs in the titles of thirteen psalms: Psalms 32, 42, 44, 45, 52, 53, 54, 55, 74, 78, 88, 89, and 142. The word also occurs in the text of Psalm 47:7. Commentators have rendered it "artistic song" or "didactic song" because it comes from the

maskil

verb "to be wise or skilled." If we are thinking in terms of the "didactic" poem (intended to teach some special truth), most of these psalms, with the exception of Psalms 32 and 78, do not fit into the category that well. Kraus points to 2 Chronicles 30:22, which describes levitical activity with the participle of this root (*skl*) and submits that "presenting songs and poems in a skilled, intelligent, and artistic way has something to do with the explanation of *maskil.*"[18] The Levites were evidently singing well-crafted songs. Perhaps that comes as close to the meaning of this term as we can get with our present knowledge of ancient Israelite poetry.

5. *Shiggaion*. This term occurs only once in the Psalms, in the heading of Psalm 7, but the plural form also occurs in the poem of Habakkuk (Hab. 3:1). It seems to come from a verb that means "to err" or "to wander," implying penitence, but neither Psalm 7 nor Habakkuk 3 is a penitential psalm or a lament. A. F. Kirkpatrick suggested that it has something to do with the ecstatic, passionate character of the poetry.[19] Kraus connects it to the Akkadian word *segu* ("lamentation") and suggests "agitated lament."[20] We will simply have to wait for further information before we can speak more confidently.
6. *Tehillah* ("song of praise"). Interestingly, this noun, which in its plural form came to be the Hebrew designation of the entire book of Psalms, occurs as a genre of psalm in Psalm 145, but elsewhere in the body of the Psalms it is used in the sense of "praise" (22:25; 33:1; 34:1; 40:3; 48:10; 65:1; 71:8; 100:4; 106:12, 47; 119:171; 147:1; 148:14; 149:1). In Nehemiah 12:46 this noun occurs in conjunction with "song" ("song of praise" = *shir tehillah*). In view of so many obscure terms, we can be grateful that the meaning of this one is so clear.
7. ***Tefillah*** ("prayer"). This noun appears in the titles of five psalms: Psalms 17, 86, 90, 102, and 142. It also occurs in Habakkuk 3:1 in the phrase "a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet." It is the general term for prayer in the Psalms as well as in the Old Testament. As a term for genre, Kraus proposes that it applies to a prayer of lament or a bidding prayer.[21]

tefillah

Titles with Musical Terms

We can only wish we knew more than we do about the music of ancient Israel. The information we do have is rather laconic, but it is sufficient to inform us that music played a large role in ancient Israel and in the temple. The following musical terms occur in the Psalms.

1. ***Lamenatstseakh*** ("to the choirmaster"). This expression occurs in the title of fifty-five psalms and in Habakkuk 3:19. The verb from which this noun derives (*natsakh*) means "to lead," "to excel," or "to be at the head," and is so used in 1 Chronicles 23:4, 2 Chronicles 2:2, and Ezra 3:8.[22] The verb occurs in a different Hebrew verbal stem (piel) in 1 Chronicles 15:21 in the sense of "to play the lyre." John Alexander Lamb, basing his view on the Akkadian ritual texts, proposes that this term means "to be recited by the official in charge."[23] Others have suggested that it was a special title for David, meaning "him who excels."[24] The idea of the choirmaster, in the sense of the one who leads, is still a good possibility and is just about as attractive as any of the other proposals.

lamenatstseakh

2. *Binginoth* and *'al-neginoth.* The first of these terms, *binginoth,* is made up of the preposition "with" (*b*) and the noun *neginoth,* which may mean "stringed instruments" or "stringed accompaniment," the latter indicating the manner of performance. The phrase occurs in the titles of Psalms 4, 6, 54, 55, 67, and 76, with the variant *'al-neginath* ("on stringed instruments") in Psalm 61. The verb from which it derives (*ngn*) means "to run over the strings."[25] We can be pretty certain then that these psalms were to be recited or sung to the strains of stringed instruments.
3. *'al-hashminith* ("according to the eighth"). This particular phrase, according to some, suggests that the instruments are tuned for the bass singers ("according to the eighth"). Kraus suggests that it refers not to the voice but to the instrument, "on the eight-stringed (instrument)."[26] It occurs in the titles of Psalms 6 and 12, as well as in 1 Chronicles 15:21, where it is joined with the verb "to play a stringed instrument," and the instrument is identified as the lyre. Therefore, it seems that the term is not the instrument itself but the range of voice.
4. *'al-muth, 'almuth labben,* and *'al-'alamoth.* These three phrases are considered by some to be variants upon one meaning. They may be the counterpart to the preceding phrase, referring to the female range rather than the male.[27] The term *'al-'alamoth* occurs in the title of Psalm 46 and in 1 Chronicles 15:20, where it may mean "according to maidens." A. S. Gordon proposes that these are the instruments tuned for the maidens, that is, in a soprano key.[28] The longer term *'almuth labben* occurs in Psalm 9, and the shorter term *'almuth* is found at the end of Psalm 48 (v. 14).

Titles with Musical Tunes

At this point we begin discussing a series of terms that are often interpreted as tune names.

1. *'al-hagittith* ("upon *gittith*"). Psalms 8, 81, and 84 carry this term in their titles. The Targum supposes this to be a musical instrument that originated in Gath. But *gath* also means "winepress," and in the LXX the title is "according to the winepress," suggesting a vintage song.[29]
2. *'al-tashkheth* ("Do not destroy"). This clause occurs in the titles of Psalms 57, 58, 59, and 75, where it immediately follows the opening phrase, "to the choirmaster." Some scholars have referenced Isaiah 65:8, where this expression occurs and seems to refer to a vintage song, and thus have seen it in the Psalms as an expression of a hymn tune.
3. *'al-'ayyeleth hashakhar* ("on the hind of the dawn"). This phrase occurs only in the title of Psalm 22. If we understand it as a tune, then we should understand it in the sense of "set to the hind of the morning,"[30] but why the tune was so named is inexplicable.
4. *'al-shoshannim* and *'al-shushan 'eduth* ("on the lilies" and "according to the lily of testimony"). Both are likely hymn tunes, the first occurring in Psalms 45 and 69, and the second in Psalms 60 ("according to the lily of the testimony") and 80 ("to the lilies, a testimony"). The LXX interpreted the word *shoshannim* as "those who change." L. Delekat basically agrees with this translation and refers these

psalms to "those whose situation changes for the worse."[31] The word *'eduth* ("testimony") in the second phrase is as problematic as the first noun of the phrase. Perhaps it could refer to the oracle of Psalm 60:6–8, but there is no such oracle in Psalm 80.[32] The best we can do is view it as a hymn tune, and leave the matter there.

5. *'al-yonath 'elem rekhoqim* ("set to the dove of the far-off terebinths").[33] This expression occurs only in the title of Psalm 56, and, like the other so-called hymn tunes, our understanding is insufficient to inform us why this tune was applied to the psalm.

Musical Instruments

Ancient Near Eastern literature gives us quite a bit of information about the various musical instruments used during the Old Testament period. This is especially true of the iconographic information we have. Although we have few art forms from Israelite culture, most likely due to the Old Testament's opposition to images, this is not true of Israel's neighbors, and musical instruments figure prominently among the cultural artifacts represented in this material. The Psalms mention a number of musical instruments, which we can classify in three groups: (1) percussion, (2) winds, and (3) strings.

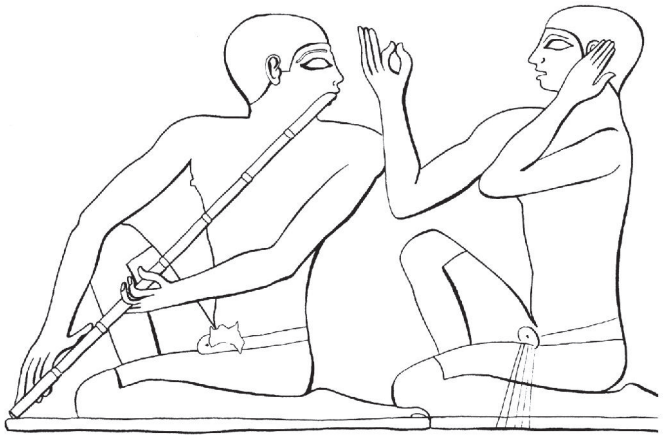
Two percussion instruments are mentioned in the Psalms: the hand drum or tambourine (Pss. 81:2; 149:3; 150:4)[34] and cymbals (Ps. 150:5; 1 Chron. 13:8; 15:16–17). The tambourine (*toph*) was used in processions, especially at victory celebrations (Ps. 68:24–25).[35]

Cymbals (*tsiltselim*)[36] were also used in Israelite worship. Archaeological discoveries from the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages in Canaan give the impression that this instrument was used widely during that time.[37] Psalm 150 lists cymbals in the orchestra of praise: "Praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals" (v. 5). One cannot be certain about the difference between the "clash of cymbals" and the "resounding cymbals," but perhaps the difference was in the method of performance rather than the instrument.

A clay figure of a woman with a hand drum or tambourine

Wind instruments mentioned in the Psalms are the horn (*shofar*; 47:5; 81:3; 98:6; 150:3), the trumpet (*khatsotserah*; Ps. 98:6),

Musicians playing the tambourine (left), two types of lyres, and cymbals



An Egyptian scene with a flautist accompanying the singer on the right, as the vocalist covers his ear to sense the resonance of his voice so that he might have better vocal control.

and the flute (*'ugav*; Ps. 150:4). The horn was likely the ram's horn, which was used to announce important occasions (Exod. 20:18; 2 Sam. 15:10; 1 Kings 1:34, 39, 41–42; 2 Kings 9:13) and to sound alarms (Ps. 81:3). By the nature of the instrument, however, it was not helpful for accompaniment.

The trumpet seems to have been the favorite instrument of the Chronicler. He uses the noun nineteen times and the verb six times. It was probably of Egyptian origin and is attested in the art and literature of the middle of the third millennium BC onward.[38] This instrument replaced the horn at the coronation of Solomon (971–931 BC, 1 Kings 1:34, 39, 41). It appears only once in the Psalms (98:6), where the people acclaim Yahweh as King with an orchestra and singing.

The third wind instrument mentioned in the Psalms, and mentioned only once, is the flute. Flutes made of bone are attested in Egypt as early as the fourth millennium BC.[39] The double flute (*halil*), which had a brighter sound, is attested in Israel. A figure of a man playing the double flute indicates that it was rather short and as a result would have had higher tones than a longer instrument of its diameter and material. In the Old Testament this instrument was used by prophetic bands (1 Sam. 10:5), played at festivals (Isa. 5:12), and played on joyful and festal occasions (1 Kings 1:40; Isa. 30:29).[40]

Top: A lyre (*nevel*) with its sounding-box in the shape of a jar on a coin of the First Jewish Revolt (AD 66–70). *Bottom*: A lyre (*kinnor*) with a rounded sounding-box on a coin of the First Jewish Revolt (AD 66–70).

Stringed instruments seem to have been a favorite accompaniment for singing. The Hebrew word *kinnor* occurs thirteen times in the Psalms, and *nevel* occurs eight times, each probably representing a different type of lyre. Keel distinguishes between two kinds of lyres. One has a sounding-box shaped like a jar and a curved yoke, while the other has a rounded bottom with a simple sounding-board and only slightly curved yoke-arms.[41] Since the word *nevel* is also used of a large storage jar (Isa. 30:14; Lam. 4:2), the suggestion is that the *nevel* designates the type of lyre with the jar sounding-box.[42] It would appear that the *kinnor* was more commonly used in ancient Israel (Ps. 137:2). From the pictures of the lyre in ancient art, the number of strings varied, but some lyres had as many as ten strings (Ps. 144:9).

As the Psalms show, at times these instruments were played in concert together to accompany singing (2 Chron. 5:12–13), while on other occasions the orchestra played to the chanting of praise to God (Ps. 150).

Singing

The nature of singing in the tabernacle and temple is another difficult topic. In fact, it is probably not possible to speak generally because practices changed through the centuries of worship. There is evidence, however, that antiphonal singing was in vogue in early times. After David's slaying of Goliath, the women offered their popular support as they danced and "answered one another" (NIV has simply "sang"): "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7). The double subject would lend itself nicely to antiphonal singing. The refrains of Psalms 118:1–4 and 136 definitely anticipate an antiphonal

Study Questions

1. Calvin referred to the psalmists as prophets. Although the book of Psalms is not included in the Hebrew division of the prophets, how is his assessment accurate?
2. Comment on the literary links between David's poetry outside the Psalms and the poetry within. How does this speak to the issue of David's authorship?
3. Even by the time of the LXX, the logical connection between the titles and content of many psalms had become obscure. What might this suggest about the antiquity of the titles? And about their content?
4. Read the thirteen historical titles of the psalms along with their historical texts in 1 and 2 Samuel. Comment on the realism this adds to the traditional association of David with the psalms.
5. Familiarize yourself with the musical terms and names of the musical tunes and then read the content of those psalms. What does this awareness of titles add to a reading of the text?
6. What are the three general classes of instruments mentioned in the Psalms, and what are the individual instruments in each class?

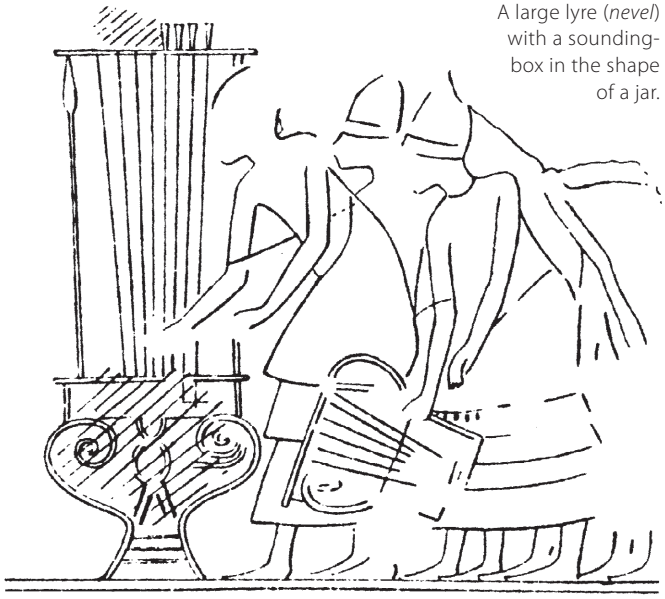
Key Terms

Tehillim
mizmor
Writings
shir
miktam
maskil
tefillah
lamenatstseakh

style of recitation or singing, and Psalms 124:1 and 129:1 call for a response as well ("let Israel say").

The Psalter attests to the existence of singers in the temple (Pss. 68:25; 87:7). Moreover, the witness of the books of Chronicles to the musical activity in the temple, and particularly to singers, is not likely the Chronicler's invention. Obviously he knew personally about this great tradition, and he traces it back to the time of David (1 Chron. 15:16; 2 Chron. 35:15).

The Psalms inform us that the lyre and other instruments accompanied hymns of thanksgiving (Pss. 57:8–9; 71:22; 98:5–6). To what extent the congregation joined in the singing activity of the choir we cannot say, but it is quite likely that congregational participation grew with the development of the temple liturgy.



A large lyre (*nevel*) with a sounding-box in the shape of a jar.

These men, evidently captives, are playing the lyre (*kinnor* or *nevel*), an instrument known in Egypt as early as the second millennium BC—perhaps imported from Canaan.