

## QUICK NOTES ON THE PSALMS

The text of the psalms has undergone considerable editorial work through the centuries. The headings found on many of the psalms were part of this process, and even those later headings are in many cases hard to interpret. Some of them include directions for performance, but we can't be sure what is intended. The word *selah*, which ends many poems, is a bit of a mystery. The exact meanings of some words seem to have been hard for later generations to read, so that the Masoretic text and the LXX differ in their readings on occasion, and translators have been driven to frequent emendation, justified or not.

The setting of the Psalms is also up for debate. It seems pretty clear that after the exile at least some psalms were used in temple worship, but that doesn't guarantee that even those psalms were originally written for public worship. Scholars have spent a lot of time classifying psalms by subject matter (lament, praise, thanksgiving) or apparent occasion: In the Anchor Bible translation, Psalm 4 seems to be a prayer for rain; Psalm 45 is generally taken to be a wedding psalm. But there is a fair amount of overlap. A varying number of the psalms have been labeled as wisdom psalms by some, and some who stress cultic uses have postulated that a number were for a ceremony of the "enthronement of Yahweh."

The final Jewish version of the Psalms is traditionally divided into 5 "books" (an echo of the 5 books of the Torah). Each ends with a doxology or benediction: 1 (1-41), 2 (42-72), 3 (73-89), 4 (90-106), and 5 (107-150).

– The first two books may have begun as collections of songs ascribed to David—Psalm 72 ends "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended"—though many later Psalms are also ascribed to him, though those in book 3 are generally ascribed elsewhere—Psalms 42-49 and some later psalms in this section, for example, are "of the sons of Korah."

--Another structural difference is that the psalms of book 1 are Yahwistic, and the psalms of books 2 and 3 are Elohist. Psalm 53, for example, repeats Psalm 14 but substitutes "Elohim." The assumption is that the Elohist psalms were collected at a time or by an editor who wished to make sure that the sacred name Yahweh was not inadvertently spoken.

–The poetic form of the Psalms is similar to that found in Hebrew poetry generally, and echoes that found in other nations of the area in this era. The parallelism of meaning between verses or parts of verses survives translation. Some other patterning elements do not; several psalms, for example, are acrostics.

–The dating of individual psalms varies widely. A few psalms are almost certainly relatively late—Psalm 137 is obviously written during the exile—but others are often dated to Davidic times and may even be, as tradition would have it, written by or for David himself. Others ascribe many psalms to the postexilic period. At any rate, the final organization of the book is probably postexilic but relatively set by 200 BC.

