



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Introduction

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

- The psalms of the Bible were composed, with divine inspiration, approximately twenty-five hundred years ago
- This sacred poetry of praise and lamentation was influenced by the Hebrew people from their own intense experience; it is a poetry of the human heart reflecting triumph, desolation, and the ordinary affairs of life
- The psalms have been used continuously down through the ages since those times
- They are traditionally called the “psalms of David,” although many of them most certainly come from other authors of much later times



Introduction

- Almost every aspect of worship and almost all states of man's soul before God are found expressed in the psalms: praise, thanksgiving, penitence, intercession, blessing, rejoicing, petitioning, repenting, lamenting, questioning and even complaining
- The Septuagint is the version of the Old Testament used by the Orthodox Church
- The Septuagint Psalter differs in several respects from Masoretic text, which forms the basis for the King James Version and most modern English translations of the Bible



Introduction

- The differences between the two translations:

Hebrew	Septuagint
1-8	1-8
9-10	9
11-113	10-112
114-115	113
116	114-115
117-146	116-145
147	146-147
148-150	148-150
	151



Introduction

- In addition to considerable, textual differences, the Septuagint and Masoretic versions of the Psalter differ most obviously in their chapter divisions
- This can cause confusion to readers who do not understand the differences between the two versions
- The numerous psalm quotations in the New Testament make it obvious that the psalter was the prayer-book of the first Christians
- The Psalter is so predominant in Orthodox worship that St. John Chrysostom said that wherever one looks in the Church, he finds the Psalter "first, last, and central"



Introduction

- Many of the psalms are centered in the religious rituals of the Jerusalem temple
- Others recount God's saving works in Israelite history
- Still others are prophecies about events yet to come, particularly those of the Jesus Christ
- Thus, for example, we find Christ quoting Psalm 8 in reference to His triumphal entry into Jerusalem; Psalm 110 in reference to his own mysterious divinity; and Psalm 22, when, hanging upon the cross, He cries out with the words of the psalm in which is described His crucifixion and His ultimate salvation of the world (Matthew 21:16,22:44,27:46)



The Goal of This Study

- When observing the hours, some may find reading the words of some Psalms uncomfortable and some have a hard time understanding the meaning
- While we are seeking earnest repentance, it seems wrong to boast to God about how righteous we are and how we will smite and grind to dust those who work iniquity and so forth
- They object to parts of the Psalms because they seem to contradict the divine law of love taught by Christ
- We need to know that when the psalms speak of “boasting in righteousness” it does not mean this in the prideful sense



The Goal of This Study

- And the psalms which call for smiting one's enemies are speaking of spiritual enemies—overcoming them through prayer, fasting, and the “armor” of righteousness
- Perhaps, rather than eliminating psalms and prayers we do not like, it would be edifying to seek the meanings and contexts contained therein and therefore, strive to expand our appreciation and understanding



The Title of the Book

- According to Oxford dictionary, a “psalm” is a song, poem or prayer that praises God
- The word *psalm*, which is pronounced with a silent *p*, comes from the Greek word *psalmos* "song sung to a harp," and its root, *psallein*, "play a stringed instrument"
- The Hebrew word for “psalm” is *mizmor*
- Mizmor means a poem, or song, whose singing is accompanied by an instrument, particularly the harp
- The Hebrew name of book of Psalms is *Tehillim* ("praises" or "hymns")



The Title of the Book

- It is called the *Book of Psalms* and commonly referred to simply as Psalms, the Psalter
- It is a collection of psalms, of all the psalms that were divinely inspired
- Although these psalms were composed at several times and upon several occasions, they were put together without any reference to or dependence upon one another
- Thus they were preserved from being scattered and lost, and were in so much greater readiness for the service of the church



The Titles of the Psalms

- To more than a hundred Psalms are prefixed titles, which give one or more of the following:
- The direction to the musician, the name of the author or the instrument, the style of the music or of the poetry, the subject or occasion
- Many of the Psalms carry the names of individuals, the most common are of David
- Others named include Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, Moses, Ethan the Ezrahite and Heman the Ezrahite
- Many psalms (116 of the 150) have individual titles, ranging from lengthy comments to a single word



Authors

- This book is often called "The Psalms of David," he being the only author mentioned in the New Testament (Luke 20:42) and his name appearing in more titles than that of any other writer
- He wrote about 74 psalms
- He played upon the harp (1 Samuel 16:18-23; 2 Samuel 6:5) and is called "*the sweet psalmist of Israel*" (2 Samuel 23:1)
- He had unusual gifts as a poet (2 Samuel 1:19-27, 3:33, 22:1-51, 23:1-7), and was a lover of the liturgy (2 Samuel 6:5, 15)
- He arranged the service of song in the sanctuary (1 Chronicles 6:31, 16:7, 25:1; Ezra 3:10; Nehemiah 12:24, 36, 45-46; Amos 6:5)



Authors

- Twenty-four psalms are ascribed to Asaph and to the sons of Korah, as well as to Heman and Ethan
- Moses, may have written Psalm 90
- One or two psalms may have been written by Solomon
- The 49 remaining psalms appeared without a name and are called the "orphan Psalms"
- It is thought that David might have written some of them



Its Characteristics

- This book was originally the hymn book of God's people
- Some psalms were composed for liturgical use in the temple, others for private lives, and at the same time they were used for communal worship
- Some scholars believe that the Psalter was not intended for use in the temple worship, saying that the deep spirituality of this book refutes this idea, as they believe that spirituality is connected only with individualism in worship
- However, the early church communal worship was not separated from personal worship



Its Characteristics

- The believer, wherever he is, in the church or in his private room, practices one kind of worship
- As the book contains one hundred fifty independent compositions, it is not subject of any logical analysis
- The Jews have divided it into five books, corresponding to the Five Books of Moses (First, Psalms 1-42; Second, Psalms 43-72; Third, Psalms 73-89; Fourth, Psalms 90-106; Fifth, Psalms 107-150)
- Many attempts have been made to discover, in this division, some critical or practical value, but in vain



Its Characteristics

- Critics have; however, placed the largest number of the Psalms in four periods of history
- (1) Before the Captivity
- (2) During the Captivity
- (3) From the Captivity to the Maccabees
- (4) In the Maccabean (or subsequent) age
- Still, within limits so large it is often next to impossible to decide on the precise date of a psalm



Its Characteristics

- The Psalms have a form and character unique to themselves
- They are all poetical; they are all lyrical, or songs adapted to musical instruments
- And they are all religious lyrics, or such as were designed to be used in the sanctuary worship
- In spite of their individual varieties of style and subject, they all together constitute a consistent system of moral truth
- The psalms express the experience of God's people in all ages, the Book of Psalms is considered the prayer and praise manual of the Christian Church even today
- The personal history of the authors, and especially David's in its spiritual aspects, is that of God's people generally



Its Characteristics

- Many vague words mentioned in the Psalms, like "selah" which appears seventy-three times, indicate either directions to the musicians or to the time to which the psalm was to be sung
- Some scholars state that "selah" is probably derived from the Hebrew root "selah" meaning to lift up or to raise, so that the music or the voice rises at the indicated points, or perhaps the congregation rises or lifts up its hands, head or eyes as an act of worship
- The Book of Psalms is the book for all who are in need: the sick and the suffering, the poor and the needy, the prisoner and the exiled, the person in danger and the persecuted



Its Characteristics

- The psalms express the life of prayer as a balance between thanksgiving to God and supplication for God's help
- They all voice the inner feelings of the human heart in every age
- Many scholars state that the psalms were often sung by the professional choir and a very elaborate orchestra, while the people just sang the Amen and made occasional responses
- In the early Coptic Church, however all the congregation were divided into two choirs: northern and southern, to participate in singing the psalms and hymns



Its Characteristics

- The historical summaries of the Psalms are richly instructive
- God's choice of the patriarchs, the sufferings of the Israelites in Egypt, their exodus, temptations of God, rebellions and devastations in the wilderness, settlement in Canaan, going back to their old ways and restorations, provide illustrations of God's divine authority over His people, individually and collectively, tending to exalt His wonderful grace and lower human pride
- But the promises and prophecies connected with these summaries, and elsewhere presented in the Psalms, have a far wider reach, exhibiting the relations of the book to the great theme of promise and prophecy



Its Characteristics

- The prophecy of the Messiah and His Kingdom; David was God's chosen servant to rule His people; the lineal ancestor, "according to the flesh" [Acts 2:30; Romans 1:3], of His Son, and His type, in His official relations, both in suffering and in triumph
- In some of the psalms, he uses language describing his feelings, that only finds its full meaning in the feelings of Christ
- Great prophetic themes which run throughout this book are quoted in the New Testament
- Our Lord Himself says, *"all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses, and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me"* (Luke 24:44)



Its Significance

- In the Orthodox Church the psalms are understood as having their deepest and most genuine spiritual meaning in terms of Christ and His mission of eternal salvation
- The psalms which refer to the king are in reference to Christ's exaltation and glorification at the right hand of God
- The psalms which refer to Israel's deliverance are reference to Christ's redemption of the whole world
- The psalms calling for victory over the enemies in battle refer to the only real Enemy, the devil, and all of his wicked works which Christ has come to destroy



Its Significance

- Babylon signifies the realm of Satan
- Jerusalem signifies the eternal Kingdom of God
- The psalms which lament the innocent suffering of the righteous are the plea of the Lord Himself and all those with Him who are the “poor and needy” who will rise up to rule the earth on the day of God’s judgment
- Thus, the psalter remains forever as the divinely-inspired song book of prayer and worship for all of God’s People, and most especially for those who belong to the Messiah whose words the psalms are in their deepest and most divine significance



Its Significance

The function of the Psalms in the Orthodox Christian spiritual life has been well set forth by St. Basil the Great:

- "When the Holy Spirit saw that the human race was guided only with difficulty toward virtue, and that, because of our inclination toward pleasure, we were neglectful of an upright life, what did He do? The delight of melody He mingled with the doctrines so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without perceiving it the benefit of the words, just as wise physicians who, when giving the fastidious rather bitter drugs to drink, frequently smear the cup with honey.



Its Significance

- Therefore, He devised for us these harmonious melodies of the Psalms, that they who are children in age, or even those who are youthful in disposition, might to all appearances chant but, in reality, become trained in soul." (Homily X, 1; On Psalm I.)

Discussion



- Who wrote most of the psalms?
- Why do the Psalms talk about enemies and the wicked so much?
- Why do some Psalms speak about hate, when Christians are commanded to love?
- Is it okay to ask God tough questions? How can the Psalms help when I am down or depressed?