

Survey of the Old Testament

Psalms

1. This is not a continuous book, as other books that we have thus far studied. It is a collection of psalms. Thus, it is not technically accurate to refer to “Psalms, chapter 1,” “Psalms, chapter 2,” etc. It is “Psalm 1,” or “the first Psalm,” etc.
2. But, for the sake of studying, we sometimes treat the Psalms as chapters. In this vein, Psalms contains the longest “chapter” in the Bible (119 – 176 verses), and the shortest “chapter” in the Bible (117 – 2 verses).
3. The Hebrew word *Selah* occurs various times throughout the Psalms. No one knows for sure what it means. It is generally thought to be some sort of musical notation, such as a pause or a crescendo.
4. We cannot be sure about the authorship of all of the Psalms.
 - a. Most of them (101) have titles. It is typically suggested that the titles are not inspired, but the oldest manuscripts available have them. So, we cannot be sure if they are inspired or not. Also, the titles can be a bit ambiguous, since it is possible for the “of” to mean “for” or “to.” So, does the title tell us who wrote the psalm or for whom it was written? If the titles indicate authorship, this is what we learn:
 - 1) 73 are ascribed to David.
 - 2) 28 are ascribed to other authors: Moses (90), Asaph (82), the sons of Korah (87), Heman the Ezrahite (88), Ethan the Ezrahite (89), Solomon (72; 127).
 - 3) 49 are anonymous.
 - b. Some are specifically ascribed to David in the New Testament (e.g., Mt. 22:43/Ps. 110:1; Acts 2:25/Ps. 16:8). Two Psalms are attributed to David in the New Testament but do not have titles (Ps. 2:1-2/Acts 4:25; Ps. 95:7-8/Heb. 4:7).
9. The book of Psalms is divided into five groups, often called “books.” Each of these sections ends with a doxology. (An expression of praise for God, and an ending statement). Note 41:13; 72:18-19 (then note v. 20); 89:52; 106:48.
 1. Book I – 1-41
 2. Book II – 42-72
 3. Book III – 73-89
 4. Book IV – 90-106
 5. Book V – 107-150
10. Because it is poetry, there is a wide vocabulary, a variety of rich imagery, and interesting stylistic forms. Consider 25, 119, 136.
10. Psalms is the Old Testament book which is most quoted in the New Testament.
11. The Psalms are popular because they reflect common human experiences.

Because of the nature of the book of Psalms, a satisfactory “survey” is not possible. A list of some of the various themes that seem to repeat throughout the Psalms is the best that can be done. Even then, an exhaustive list is not possible. What follows is only a sample.

1. Psalms of praise (also called hymns of praise). (e.g. 8, 29, 104; 100; 148).
2. Lament Psalms (sometimes called Psalms of complaint). These include individual laments (e.g., 6) and corporate laments (e.g., 74).
3. Psalms of Penitence (e.g., 38, 51)
4. Psalms of thanksgiving (e.g., 30, 32, 107).
5. Psalms of royalty. These show a special connection and interest in Israel’s kings. Thus, they sometimes make reference to the coming Messiah, because he would be a king. They often involve three subcategories: weddings (45), coronations (2, 72, 101), and battles (89, 144).
6. Wisdom Psalms. These are similar to Proverbs, since they deal with matters of wise living (e.g., 1, 25).
7. Imprecatory Psalms (35, 69). These involve calling down a curse on someone. Remember that the Psalms were inspired by God. Thus, it could be an expression of Divine justice through the human experience. God does have the right to judge and punish. It is a way to express frustration and agony to God – without taking evil actions toward those who have hurt you. Remember the Psalms deal with human emotions – including those that could lead to sin.
8. Messianic Psalms. These are Psalms that make references to Jesus or to his messianic work. Note Jesus’ statement that there are things written about him in the Law, in the prophets, and in the Psalms (Lk. 24:44). Examples include 2; 16; 110.