

Introduction to Psalms

Written by K B Napier
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What is a Psalm? In one sense it is like a personal diary, documenting the deepest spiritual thoughts of the writer, yet it is written to give insight to others, sometimes as poetry and sometimes as songs. However, it is more than that... it contains thoughts generated by the Holy Spirit in a soul ready to obey and glorify God, and is therefore acceptable as coming from God Himself.

As believers we should ALL be thinking in psalms, for God must be our centre of being, our first and last reason for living, and the originator of our thoughts. Everything we think and do must be from and to His glory. (What a radical difference that would make to our lives and nation!).

Really, those churches that think we should “only sing in psalms”, without music, do not appreciate what psalms are. If they truly think psalms should be our only expression of glory, then they ought to produce songs or poems of their own, telling others of what God has given them to say! But, all they do is sing (often in dirges rather than in joyfulness) what David or other psalmist has written, a kind of second-hand experience. Really, too, this is what we do when we sing hymns... how many actually read the texts of any hymn and see if it is apt or genuinely scriptural? And how many sing without thinking?

In Chronicles, a psalm is a testimony of thanks or praise, or a confession of the name of God. In David's Psalms, a 'psalm' is simply a song or melody, a *mizmowr*. The confirmation that this is a song played to the tune of a musical instrument, is in the root,

zamar

. This questions the authenticity of those today who believe we must chant psalms-only unaccompanied by music. The instrument was struck or plucked with the fingers (from the idea of plucking grapes from a vine), also

zamar

. Thus, a zither, harp, guitar, or any stringed instrument seems to be suitable.

What is the difference between a guitar and an harp? None but the association in the mind. The guitar is nowadays used for music more appropriate for sin, but it is a much older instrument used for serious and melodic music. A piano is struck with hammers, taking the place of fingers, and is like a harp being struck with sticks. An organ uses air, much as flutes did in the days of David. The more one thinks of instruments, and their use in David's time, the less one can justify rejecting music of any kind when played to the glory of God.

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The lead verse in Psalm 108 calls the entry “A song (or) Psalm of David”, implying that both are equal; a song being **shiyr**, a lyric or religious song sung either by an individual or by Levitical choirs accompanied by trumpets. The word also applies to strolling minstrels. It can also refer to music... music, of course, being produced by instruments. As David said later in that same Psalm,

“I will sing and give praise”. When Paul referred to the “second psalm”

he used a word that, in the Greek, is **psalmos**

, which combines both singing and musical accompaniment... twanging or striking strings as well as singing a ‘pious song’. The root,

psali

ō, confirms the idea of singing to an instrument. So, in the New Testament, too, the beliefs of those who only sing in dirge-like manner without instruments are without foundation.

My suggestion that each should sing or speak his own psalm has resonance in 1 Corinthians 14:26 where Paul says “When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue...” , implying that the ‘psalm’ is given to the individual extempore, to sing or speak as a poem.

Matthew Henry, quoting the views of others, says the Psalms are a summary of both Old and New Testaments. This is how all Christian sayings and notes ought to be, for they cannot help but repeat the truths of God’s word. Jewish scholars call the Psalms **Tehillim**, or ‘psalms of praise’. But, a Psalm can also be more formal than that, covering such topics as history, events, doctrine, pleas to God, and so on. In many ways the minstrels and court counsels of ancient Britain did the same job, but in secular form. They, too, used instruments. And both Jewish and other singers used psalmody as memory joggers for the nation. Most Psalms were written, sung, and played by David himself who has been called in Samuel the “sweet psalmist of Israel”

. Not all Psalms contain David’s name, but many belong to him. A psalm by Moses is included, as well as some by Asaph, and even some written a long time afterwards, during the Babylonian exile.

Really, Psalms are devotional writings, so are less ‘schoolish’ than other writings. They tend to be warmer because they express the emotions and thoughts of the heart, as well as absolute truth. Though containing emotional content, the psalms are, nevertheless, accurate portrayals of doctrine. Indeed, they are accurate in every way, as they come from the mind of God. As a whole the Psalms were divided into five books, but each Psalm stands alone. The first section begins with One and ends with 41; the second, 42 to 72; the third, 73 to 89; the fourth, 90 to 106, and the fifth, 107 to 150. But, these divisions are suggestions by scholars and not fixed or

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required. Hence, other scholars divide them up differently! The guiding principle is simply that each Psalm stands alone and is not connected to the others.