

# **THE BOOK OF PSALMS**

**(STUDY NOTES)**

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

PSALTER (Greek: PSALTERION ) is a collection of 150 lyrics/poems to be sung with string instruments. The lyrics/poems/songs of the Psalms are popular all over the world. The Psalter is the expression of the longing of the human heart to be in touch with God. To be in touch with God is PRAYER. The Psalter is the most beautiful collection of prayers.

The Psalms are a wisdom book in a special way because they require a way of listening to them (once one has studied them) that gives way to that SILENCE in which God speaks.

The Psalms are poetry and prayer. They have as central theme the DRAMA of our Human Existence as it calls for God. They express a variety of feelings that give resonance to the Human Drama that marks the field of our prayer: to make room for the Spirit of God to intercede for us, within us (Cf. *Romans* 8:26-27).

The Psalms are part of the heritage or patrimony of Humanity. They are “the Prayer” *par excellence*. They are, as it were, within the “genetic code” of humanity. The “child”, which is in every human being, crying for God (*Ps.* 8:2-3). The moment of spontaneity and authenticity, the intensity of the experience become words that resonate in the depths of our interiority and become prayer.

“Nobody has ever seen God” (*John* 1:18). Our time is a time of noise, and absence of God (secularization/materialism): our search for God must therefore be done in Silence/ in the bosom of Silence/ and as the fruit of a loving and persevering frequentation (Cf. *Psalms* 22:3).

In prayer, we run the risk of subjectivism, or psychologism: to make of our prayer a monologue with ourselves, a mere psychological analysis. But the word of God comes to our rescue. The Psalms are the words of prayer that God himself puts in our mouth. It is the Holy Spirit the true Prayer-er (2 *Timothy* 3:16). Cf. The note of Joseph Ratzinger (Congregation for the Defense of faith) on *the True Prayer of the Christian*:

1. Christian Prayer is essentially the answer to a questioning which comes directly from the word of God. A personal encounter with a personal God.
2. The fruit of authentic Christian Prayer is the Obedience of Faith.
3. Christian Prayer is not only/mainly the profound expression of the depths of our being but especially the fruit of the Holy Spirit who prays in us.
4. In the Psalms: Jesus is hidden; The Holy Spirit rests.

## **The Classification of the Psalms (General suggestions)**

1. Traditionally, the PSALTER is divided into 5 books and each book ends with a Doxology.

Book I : 1 – 41 (41:13 Doxology)

Book II : 42 – 72 (72:18-20 Doxology)

Book III : 73 – 89 (89:52 Doxology)

Book IV : 90 – 106 (106:48 Doxology)

Book V : 107 – 150 (From 147 to 150 all Doxology)

This division has **no relevance** because there is no order in the grouping of the Psalms.

2. There are different ways of classifying the Psalms and there are different opinions as how to classify an individual Psalm (or to which category to attribute it). What follows are different ways of understanding a classification of the Psalms that shows us their richness.

3. The Psalms reflect the three basic moods of the human heart: The pinch of need: Petition, Entreaty; The joy of receiving: Thanksgiving; The movement of forgetting self, absorbed as we are in the beauty of God and his creatures: Praise.

4. The following is a simple way of classifying the Psalms in reference to our life experience: PSALMS of ORIENTATION: when everything goes well: Hymns of Praise, Wisdom Psalms; PSALMS OF DISORIENTATION: when there is a problem, suffering, crisis: Petition,

Lamentation, Entreaty; PSALMS OF RE-ORIENTATION: God sends His help/the situation changes for the better, life starts again: Thanksgiving.

Petition, thanksgiving and praise: 3 forms or kinds of prayer: they correspond to the movements of the heart (the 3 moods of the Heart). It is a story of ORIENTATION: God is the law of my life; it is a story of DISORIENTATION: God is with me in the midst of my crisis. The Psalmist still cries to God in darkness, pain and confusion; it is a story of RE-ORIENTATION - God comes to the rescue. After death comes Resurrection.

5.The PSALMS are a memory and a celebration of what God has done for His people, Israel. In *Deuteronomy* 6:4 (SHEMA, ISRAEL) God (Moses) exhorts the people to Hear and to Remember.

**Hearing** means:

Listening and Understanding.

- **Remember**- to keep in the mind and heart: memory, memorial;
- **Celebrate** – the memory has to be celebrated (obedience to the word);
- **Act** – celebration leads to action which has to transform or change the situation.

**Learn** from the Psalms: Listen to heartbeat of Yahweh (the Psalms are the heartbeat of Yahweh). Listen to Yahweh's story in the Psalms. How he wants to intermingle with the story of Israel/with my story – God and Me.

6.The dynamics of the PSALMS are **from PLEA to PRAISE**. Praise is the point of arrival. In Hebrew, the Book of Psalms is called: "Book of Praises". Praise and Thanksgiving mark a movement of reaching out/having come out of our problems. It is an Exodus and Exodus is the principal reason for Praise: Freedom. Praise is an expression of the memory of the powerful deeds of God.

**7.Contrast between Saul and David** ( *1 Samuel* 16:23). David's attitude is to go out of himself by means of singing. This is the therapeutic power of the psalms. David is a free spirit, loving, singing, praising, happily losing control in dancing...In opposition to Saul: gloomy, jealous, depressed ... The same his daughter Michal: David's dance is an act of exuberance, of religious vitality. Michal's refusal to praise and to dance is expression of death/sterility ( *2 Samuel* 6:14; 20-23). We however cannot come too quickly

to PRAISE, otherwise it is a cheap praise, superficial. It will short-change our prayer. We must not be afraid of looking in the face of our sins, imperfections, problems and bring them to the Lord with the prayer of the Psalms.

8. In order to understand the Psalms as Prayer, we need to enter in consonance/ syntony with them. It is difficult to understand religious texts if one is not a believer. It is even more difficult (extremely difficult) to understand the Psalms as prayer if one is incapable of praying. So, we have to study and approach the Psalm in a prayerful atmosphere as T.S. Eliot writes: “The PSALMS: A privileged gateway to Prayer. Doors of Perception.”

## **CLASSIFICATION SPECIFICS**

**Literally genre:** it is a “literary unit : i.e. a form of expression with words (written words) that has a certain unity. What is used are: *words*, *formulae* (or forms: combination of words to create a sentence), and *images*. These forms of expression are similar between themselves in as much as they express a similar situation or sentiment (feeling). So a “literary genre” is the use/usage of similar forms in order to fit similar contents. To classify or describe a “literary genre” one has to consider 3 elements: the content, the existential situation, the form/style.

Although The PSALMS are poetry and prayer and therefore have an infinite variety and vitality of forms which defy classification, yet **classification is useful in order to reach a certain comprehension of the Psalms. It is a way of putting order and “comprehend” i.e. embrace the richness of the Psalter.**

**There follows a detailed classification of all the 150 Psalms according to 14 categories:**

### **PSALMS OF PRAISE**

1. (HP) HYMNS OF PRAISE: 8, 19, 29, 33, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150

2. (KY) PSALMS OF THE KINGSHIP OF YAHWEH: 47, 93, 96, 98, 99
3. (CZ) CANTICLES OF ZION: 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122

## PSALMS OF THANKSGIVING

4. (CTH) COMMUNITARIAN THANKSGIVING: 65, 66, 67, 68, 85, 118, 124
5. (ITH) INDIVIDUAL THANKSGIVING: 9, 10, 30, 32, 34, 40, 92, 107, 116, 138

## PSALMS OF ENTREATY

6. (CE) COMMUNITARIAN ENTREATY: 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 90, 94, 106, 108, 123, 126, 137
7. (IE) INDIVIDUAL ENTREATY: 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 65, 69, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144

## PSALM OF TRUST

8. (CT) COMMUNITARIAN TRUST: 115, 125, 129
9. (IT) INDIVIDUAL TRUST: 3, 4, 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 121, 131
10. (RP) ROYAL PSALMS: 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144
11. (WP) WISDOM PSALMS: 1, 37, 49, 73, 91, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133, 139
12. (HPS) HISTORIC PSALMS: 78. 105
13. (PE) PROPHETIC EXHORTATIONS: 14, 50, 52, 53, 75, 82, 95, 97
14. (L) LITURGIES: 15, 24, 81, 134

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1. WP	38. IE	76. CZ	114. HP
2. RP	39. IE	77. CE	115. CT
3. IT	40. ITH	78. HPS	116. ITH
4. IT	41. IE	79. CE	117. HP
5. IE	42. IE	80. CE	118. CTH
6. IE	43. IE	81. L	119. WP
7. IE	44. CE	82. CE	120. IE
8. HP	45. RP	83. CE	121. IT
9. ITH	46. CZ	84. CZ	122. CZ
10. ITH	47. KY	85. CTH	123. CE
11. IT	48. CZ	86. IE	124. CTH
12. CE	49. WP	87. CZ	125. CT
13. IE	50. PE	88. IE	126. CE
14. PE	51. IE	89. RP	127. WP
15. L	52. PE	90. CE	128. WP
16. IT	53. PE	91. WP	129. CT
17. IE	54. IE	92. ITH	130. IE
18. RP	55. IE	93. KY	131. IT
19. HP	56. IE	94. CE	132. RP
20. RP	57. IE	95. PE	133. WP
21. RP	58. CE	96. KY	134. L
22. IE	59. IE	97. PE	135. HP
23. IT	60. CE	98. KY	136. HP
24. L	61. IE	99. KY	137. CE
25. IE	62. IT	100. HP	138. ITH
26. IE	63. IE	101. RP	139. WP
27. IT	64. IE	102. IE	140. IE
28. IE	65. CTH	103. HP	141. IE
29. HP	66. CTH	104. HP	142. IE
30. ITH	67. CTH	105. HPS	143. IE
31. IE	68. CTH	106. CE	144. RP
32. ITH	69. IE	107. ITH	145. HP
33. HP	70. IE	108. CE	146. HP
34. ITH	71. IE	109. IE	147. HP
35. IE	72. RP	110. RP	148. HP
36. IE	73. WP	111. HP	149. HP
37. WP	74. CE	112. WP	150. HP
	75. PE	113. HP	



# CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GENRES

## HYMNS

The hymn is a song/ joyous song of PRAISE for the marvels done by God. Two are the fields where we contemplate God's marvelous works:

1. Creation
2. Salvation History

### FORMS:

1. INTRODUCTION: an invitation to praise directed to the assembly or to the author himself;
2. BODY : The reasons for the praise of God are numbered and explained, but with much freedom;
3. CONCLUSION can be a renewed invitation to praise as a summary of the reasons.

To the Hymns we add:

#### *The Psalms of the Kingship of Yahweh:*

They describe the enthronement of Yahweh and they have a liturgical framework. Probably they were composed for the occasion of the moving of the Ark from one place to another. When the ark was arriving in the new place and placed or put in place, then Yahweh was enthroned among/or in the midst of the Cherubim, (Cf. Timothy Radcliff: "*The throne of God*": The throne of God is empty: God is expressed as the GREAT ABSENCE in the sense that He is TRANSCENDENT/completely different (not contained in human words and images).

They are a celebration of the Divine Kingship; they respond to the exclamation that we find in *Isaiah* (24:23; 52:7): **Yahweh Malak**: Yahweh has become king. Our God reigns! The Kingship of God is celebrated in time, and in opposition to the enemies, but it is meant for ever/everywhere: eschatological dimension: in the end/or the end of time, the Kingship of God will be recognized by everybody...

*The Songs of Zion.* These hymns are directed to the Holy City of Jerusalem. They probably originated on the occasion of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or a

feast. Jerusalem is sacred because of the presence of God and is the place of longing and praise because in it we meet God.

## PSALMS OF THANKSGIVING

They can be communitarian or individual.

They are marked by joy: no one can be thankful and unhappy.

They are more focused on the Salvation History: what God has done for us.

They are the expression of an unshakable TRUST, that God will be faithful to His promises.

They usually refer in thanksgiving to what God has done in the past, in order to ask help for the present. For an example of this type of DOXOLOGY (Praise) we have in *Rev 4:8*: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty; He was, He is and He is to come”. This verse reminds us of *Isaiah 6:3* and *Exodus 3:14*.

## PSALMS OF ENTREATY

They are the most numerous, they occupy more than one third of the Psalter. The entreaty is usually done in the context of trouble, suffering, problems; the tone therefore is one of pain, sorrow and complaint or lament.

Form/Pattern:

1. INTRODUCTION: Invocation to God, calling on God; eagerly addressing God to come to the rescue;

2. BODY: articulated often around the following two attitudes;

A. Lament or complaint

- *Individual entreaty*: danger, sickness, injustice
- *Collective*: natural calamity, epidemics, draught or national catastrophe like defeat in war, invasion, etc.

B. Entreaty: cry to God, appeal for help: a real *epiclesis*: it shows the closeness of Yahweh to His people. The past is a reason to rely on God. The entreaty tends always to make the Lord come down to the present situation of need:

*Epiclesis*: “Calling on God” is common and typical in Christian Prayer: “O God, come to my assistance” (The

Father); “Come, Lord Jesus” (The Son); “Send your Spirit on these offerings”; “Come, Holy Spirit” (The Holy Spirit)

3. CONCLUSION: Can be a blessing or renewed expression of trust or a thanksgiving.

## **PSALMS OF TRUST**

The prayer is addressed to God to express total and unconditional trust in God, only source of peace and joy. It is usually provoked by an existential situation. Ex. “Only in God is my soul at rest, only in God I trust for in you I hope, my God”. The three dimensions of time: past, present and future are summed up in “the present of God’s eternity”. These Psalms are a therapy against self-centeredness and individualism. They express a peaceful surrender and abandonment in God. There is no pattern, they are left to the inspiration of the moment. Ex. *Ps* 4:8: “I will lie down in peace and sleep comes at once for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safely”.

## **ROYAL PSALMS**

They have a special place because of the function of the monarchy in the OT and plan of salvation (Cf. the prophecy of Nathan (2 *Sam* 7). The succession of King David is very important. It is considered sign of the presence of God and place of his promises since the Messiah is expected to come from the stock of Jesse and the family of David. A special section of the Royal Psalms are the Messianic Psalms.

## **WISDOM (or DIDACTIC) PSALMS**

This group contains a variety of compositions. They are very different from each other and the main difference is that the focus is not usually God but MAN. They are :

- a meditation on the Law
- a description/meditation on the different destiny of the just man and the evil one.
- The problem of the just suffering
- The problem of the retribution of the evil person (Cr. *Ps* 73:2-3)

The same approach (Didactic) is about a category of PSALMS called **Historical**: a meditation and a celebration of God's presence in the happening of the past, especially Exodus. The Psalms want to underline the situation of the present, so the past events become, as it were, contemporary because of the bearing the past events have in the present situation. It is a wisdom approach to time as the *milieu* of God's plan of salvation, where his power is displayed.

## THE MESSIANIC PSALMS

We have already drawn attention to the prophetic element in the Psalter by mentioning the eschatological character of

1. *The songs of Zion and of the Psalms of the Kingship of God.*

The universal renewal foretold by these poems is the messianic era (age); other psalms, more specifically, speaks of the Messiah in person. Scattered through the Psalter, and of varying literary form, is a group of

2. *Royal Psalms:*

These are: - divine oracles addressed to the King: 2, 110

- prayers for the King: 20, 61, 72, 89
- thanksgiving for the King: 21
- praying of the King himself: 18, 101
- or royal procession song: 132
- a hymn of the King: 144
- even a bridal ode for a royal marriage: 45

They are ancient poems, dating from the time of Monarchy and reflecting the custom and ceremonial of the court. As originally composed, they referred to the King as a contemporary, and had a royal successor of David in mind.

BUT the King of the Chosen People is divinely anointed (in Hebrew "Messiah, the anointed one") and he is the recipient of God's blessing, and this blessing ensures the prosperity of his people. But this is not all. The divine promises to the dynasty of David made it possible to glimpse beyond this King to another and privileged descendant of David in whom God would have particular delight and whom he would designate to his saving work.

**This King is the anointed without equal, the Messiah.** The prophecy of Nathan (2 *Samuel*, 7) is the first in this series of prophecies related to the Messiah, son of David. This promise was essentially one of stability for the House of David, and this is the sense in which *Ps* 89:29 -38 and 132:11 – 12 quote it, but it was not long before it was interpreted as referring to an INDIVIDUAL, and this in *Acts* 2: 30 comes to be applied to CRIST.

It was natural, therefore, for some of these ancient royal songs, remaining in use after the fall of the monarchy, to become MESSIANIC SONGS in the strictest sense of the word. The messianic sense of *Ps* 2, 72, 110 is plain. (110 is the more frequently quoted in the N.T. than any other psalm). Even the wedding song of *Ps* 45, interpreted in the marriage allegory, beloved of the Prophets, came to express the union of the Messiah with his new Israel, and *Hebrews* 1:8 applies it to Christ.

Following the same trend, **the N.T. and early the Christian tradition applies other Psalms to Christ** which, although not royal Psalms, anticipated the situation and mind of the Messiah, the suffering of the essentially Good Man, thus 16 and 22 and selected passages from many psalms, particularly : 8, 35, 40, 41, 69, 97, 102, 118.

Similarly, the Kingship Psalms have been applied to the Kingship of Christ. Even if these applications go beyond the immediate literal sense of the text applied, they are legitimate in that the hopes inspiring the psalms could not be fully realized until the coming of the Son of God to the earth.

## Analysis of SOME

### ***Psalm* 2: The messianic DRAMA.**

Jewish and Christian traditions regard this Psalm as messianic in the same way as 110 on which it possible depends. His horizon is the future messianic era or age.

1. The rebels speak : 1 – 3
  2. Yahweh speaks : 4 – 6
  3. the Messiah speaks : 7 – 12
- with a short conclusion

“*You are my son*” - By consecrating Him King of Israel, God pronounces him “his son”. This title is present in the ancient books; but here it is more

relevant in connection with Nathan's prophecy regarding David's descent. In the new Testament, it is interpreted as "the eternal generation of the Word"; in the same way it is used in the liturgy.

*Acts* 4:25 ff: Prayer of the apostles

13:33: Part of Peter's speech

*Hebrews* 1:5: Christ superior to the Angels

5:5: Jesus chosen as high Priest

## **Ps 110: The Messiah: King and Priest and Judge**

The prerogatives of the Messiah, worldwide sovereignty and perpetual priesthood, are no more confirmed by earthly investiture than were those of the mysterious Melchizedek (*Genesis* 14, 18f)

1 - 2 : King - Enthronement

3: Divine adoption

4: Priest according to Melchizedek (both are kings and priests; both offer bread and wine; both receive their priesthood from God).

5 – 7: Judge

The most quoted Psalm in the New Testament:

- *Matthew* 22, 44

- *Acts* 2:34 –35

- *Hebrews* 1:13 5:6; 8:1; 10:12-13

- *1 Peter* 3,22

- *Philippians* 2:6-11

## **Psalm 45: Royal Wedding Song**

According to some scholars, this psalm may be a secular song to celebrate the marriage of an Israelite King; but Jewish and Christian tradition understand it as celebrating the marriage of the messianic King with Israel (prefiguring the Church)

cf. *Ezekiel* 16:8-13; *Isaiah* 62: 5; *Song of Songs*, 3:6-10 etc = a prophetic theme).

1) vv. 2 – 9 : The poet first addresses the messianic King: crediting him with attributes of Yahweh (*Ps* 145, 4 -7; 12-13 etc) and Emmanuel (*Isaiah* 9:5-6).

2) v. 10 – 16: then addresses the queen. Some passages draw their messianic meaning from allegorical interpretation: v. 8: *daughters of Kings*: the pagan nations converted to the true God; v. 10: *forget your nation* .....: Israel, like

the ancestral figure of Abraham, must cut all links with the surrounding pagan world; v. 12-13: the homage of the pagans peoples is prophesied for the messianic age.

## **READING THE PSALMS**

I. The classification should not be rigid; it has a functional importance. It is a point of departure:

- it is useful to put the reader and the pray-er in the right atmosphere of prayer, to assume the right attitude;
- It is the door/it gives the key for the right interpretation
- It is a springboard to the more intimate and profound fruition of the prayerful and poetic aspects of the Psalms.

II. The second step is to un-tap all the philosophical and theological richness of the Psalms, but especially the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of the Psalms.

III: The point of arrival is PRAYER: to make present and personal the prayerful value of each Psalm. Underlying the whole book of the Psalms is the conviction that: "to pray to God has sense and value. The mere fact of praying is seen as something extremely valuable. The Human Person (MAN) in prayer/ while praying, places himself in his place as a creature, both humble but very noble. Humble, because He becomes aware of being a creature in front of the Creator; very noble because He knows that he can speak with God, He is an interlocutor with God.

## **THE SYMBOLIC VALUE OF THE PSALTER**

The prayer/poetry value of the Psalms goes beyond or transcends the concrete circumstances in which they were composed: they become symbols of the human condition and the human destiny and its relationship with God. They have a universal value.

The three most elementary dimensions of the symbolic universe of the Psalms are:

1. VERTICAL: The standing person
2. HORIZONTAL: The sitting down person
3. DYNAMIC: the person in motion

The VERTICAL DIMENSION: The standing person: the Human Person is a standing animal:

- A. His head is symbol of his dignity (*Ps.21,3 ; 110,7*);
- B. The standing person naturally looks at the heavens, the sky, God's habitation; lifting of the mind to God;
- C. The greatest image of verticality: is the Holy Mountain, Mount Sinai, the house of God, who comes down to meet the people. Man goes up to meet God: *Ps.43,3-4*, guided by God's light. The source of light is God's face. "Let the light of your face shine on us and we shall be saved" (*Ps. 80* refrain).
- D. God looks down on us, and we look up to God: *Ps. 123:1-2*: To you I lift up my eyes, you who dwell in the Heavens, like the eyes of slaves on the hand of their Lord.

From this vertical symbolism we understand the importance of prayer, that is essentially an act of trust in the Paternity/Maternity of God. A God who cares, who comes down to meet his creature, who has pity. *Ps. 103:13-14*: "As a Father has compassion on His sons, the Lord has pity on those who fear Him for He knows of what we are made of, He remembers that we are dust".

## II. The HORIZONTAL DIMENSION: the sitting person

A. *A person sits in his house*: symbol of stability:

- to sit
- to lie down
- to abide (inhabit)

Cf. *Ps. 16:9*: "And so my heart rejoices, my soul is glad, even my body shall rest in safety ...".

- C. *God's presence gives this stability, serenity*. Habitation/house and stability" "The upright shall live in your presence (*Ps 140:114*) ... to sit, to lie or to live in the House of God is to be in His presence: Intimacy of friendship and dialogue.
- D. *The House*: is the symbol of intimacy and stability: *Ps 23:5-6* "He has prepared a banquet for me... in the Lord's own house shall I dwell forever and ever".
- E. *The House of God is Jerusalem or the Temple*: *Ps. 24:3* "Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord; ? who shall stand in His Holy place?"



Innumerable are the references to the beauty and strength of the city of God and of its temple. In it the faithful finds protection: *Ps* 91:4 “He will conceal you with His pinions, and under His wings you will find refuge” (this is a reference to the cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant). God’s city is a citadel, a rock, a shield. In it man finds peace or tranquility, intimacy: like the swallow or the sparrow: Cf. the whole of *Ps.* 84 “How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord God of Hosts”.

### III. The dynamic DIMENSION: The person on the move

A. *The idea of the journey* is very important in the Bible, with its symbolic implications. The History of Salvation implies a Humanity that moves towards God gradually/step by step/in the dynamism of revelation/reception. The stages of Salvation History express the direction of this journey. It’s a movement in time.

B. *The movement towards the meeting/encounter with God*, the House of God, peace, stability, the temple of God, the City of God....

- “to go, to move”
- “the way”
- “towards” (direction)

C. *A special place is reserved for the movement/journey towards the Temple*: to “climb” the Holy Mountain, Zion, ... The “Gradual Psalms/Psalms of Ascensions”: 120-134 are the songs of the Pilgrims to the Temple of Jerusalem. The spirituality of the Pilgrim: a passage from the everyday life (profane) to the temple (the sacred realm). Climbing to the hill of Zion and the temple marks also the climbing of the incense from the altar to the sky: symbol of people’s prayers. The movement upwards brings us, through prayer, to God’s level where the mystery of man is better understood and especially we experience communion with God.

## JESUS AND THE PSALMS

As a pious Israelite, Jesus prayed the Psalms in the synagogue. The Psalms were His Prayer Book. Through many quotations, the Gospels show us that

Jesus mirrors Himself and the circumstances of His life in the Psalms (Cf. *Luke 24:44*). For example:

*Ps 110*: Jesus uses it to claim His Divine Lordship  
(*Matthew 22:44-45*);

*Ps 118:22*: Jesus mentions when he says that “the stone rejected by the builders...” (*Matthew 21:42*; *1 Peter 2:7-8*);

*Ps 8:3*: Jesus quotes this psalm to justify His solemn entrance into the Temple (*Matthew 21:16* “from the mouth of children, babes at the breast...”).

Before going down to the Kedron Valley, after the last supper, he recites the “Great Hallel” *Ps 136* (*Matthew 26:30*);

*Psalms 22:15-16* (*John 19:28* “I thirst!”);

- also *Ps 22:1* “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (*Matthew 27:46*; *Mark 15:34*);

*Ps 31,6* “Into your hands I commend my spirit” (*Luke 23:46*);

The Psalms have penetrated the fabric of the Gospels and through Jesus they acquire all their splendor. Jesus embodies them and fulfills them: “All the aspirations, sorrows and hopes of the human beings throughout the centuries have gathered in the heart of Jesus and through Him they have found an offering to God, appealing in a powerful and irresistible way through Jesus, for love and redemption”.

The Prayer of Israel becomes the prayer of Jesus:

1. In praying the Psalms, Jesus prayed to God as ABBA. We therefore can now pray to God in the Psalms as FATHER.
2. Jesus is spoken of in the NT as Lord (*Adonay*: The Lord in the place of the unpronounceable *Yahweh*. In Greek is *Kurios*. Some Psalms are attributed to Jesus by the Christians.
3. Jesus is “spoken of” in the Psalms (they speak of Jesus) like the Messianic Psalms: 16, 110, 8, etc. There’s a whole Christology in the Psalms.
4. Jesus recites the Psalms (as we saw before Cf. 22). We can see that Jesus uses the Psalms to make sense of His life according to the prophecies of the OT, and to help us to make sense of our life too. This is particularly true of the last days of His life (in the Agony in the Garden of Olives *Ps 41-42*; on the Cross: *Ps 22, 31...*).
5. Jesus’ story and destiny are embodied in the situation of the just man unjustly persecuted: who does not show mere

resignation/passivity but cries to God in pain/anger/complaint  
but also expecting liberation from God.

## **Spiritual value of the Psalms**

(From the Jerusalem Bible)

The spiritual riches of the Psalter need no commendation. The psalms were the prayers of the Old Testament in which God inspired the feelings that his children ought to have towards him and the words they ought to use when speaking to him. They were recited by Jesus himself, by the Virgin Mary, the apostles and the early martyrs.

The Christian Church has adopted them unchanged for her official prayer. Unchanged: the cries of praise, entreaty and thanksgiving, wrung from the psalmist by event of their own times and by their personal experiences, have a universal note, expressing as they do the attitude that every man should have towards God.

Unchanged as regards the words but with a great enrichment of the sense: in the New Covenant, faithful man praises and thanks God for unveiling the secret of His inmost nature, for redeeming him by the blood of his Son, for filling him with his spirit, hence each psalm ends with the Trinitarian Doxology: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

The ancient entreaties have become more ardent since the last supper, the cross and the resurrection have taught mankind the infinite quality of the love of God, the universality and gravity of sin, the glory promised to the faithful. The hopes sung by the psalmists have been fulfilled, the Messiah has come, he reigns and all nations are summoned to praise him.

# THE BREVIARY ABOUT THE PSALMS

## A reading from the discourses of St. Ambrose on the Psalms (1)

### *The delightful book of the psalms*

Although the whole of sacred scripture breathes the spirit of God's grace, this is especially true of that delightful book, the book of the psalms. When Moses related the deeds of the fathers he did so in a plain straightforward narrative. But when he led the people through the Red Sea and saw King Pharaoh drowned with his army, he lifted his mind to more exalted things (since he had just accomplished a feat beyond his own powers) and he sang a triumphal song to God. And Mary too took her timber and urged on the other women, saying: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.'

History instructs, the law disciplines, prophecy foretells, correction shows us our faults and morality suggests what should be done: but in the book of the psalms there is something more than all this and at the same time a sort of medicine for man's spiritual health. Whoever reads the psalms finds a special remedy to cure the wounds caused by his own passions. Whoever is at pains to read the psalms will find in them a sort of gymnasium for the use of all souls, a sort of stadium of virtue, where different sorts of exercises are set out before him, from which he can choose the best suited to train him to win his crown.

If anyone will study the deeds of those who have gone before him in order to find something worthy of imitation, he will discover that just one psalm contains the whole of their history; and in one short reading he will discover a complete treasury of past memories. If a man is trying to discover what gives law its force (it is the bond of love: 'he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law'), let him read in the psalms about the great love shown by one man in submitting to great dangers in order to wipe out the shame of a whole people. In this triumph of virtue he will recognize the great things of which love is capable.

What can I say about the power of prophecy? What others announced in enigmas seems to have been promised quite openly to the psalmist alone, namely that the Lord Jesus would be born of his seed, as the Lord told him: 'One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.' Thus, in the book of

psalms not only is Jesus born for us: he accepts too his saving passion, he dies, he rises from the dead and ascends into heaven and sits at the Father's right hand. This prophet alone announced what no other had dared to say, and what was later preached in the gospel by the Lord himself.

## **A reading from the discourses of St. Ambrose on the Psalms (2)**

*I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also*

What is more pleasing than the psalm? David himself expressed it so beautifully, when he said” ‘Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing psalms to our God! How pleasant to praise him!’ And this is indeed true: for in the psalms there is an opportunity for the people to bless and praise God; the psalms express the admiration that people feel and what the people want to say; in them the Church speaks, the faith is professed in a melodious way and authority finds a ready acceptance; there too is heard the joyful call of freedom, the cry of pleasure and the sound of happiness.

The psalm soothes anger, frees from care and drives away sadness. It is a weapon by night and a teacher by day: it is a shield in times of fear, an occasion of rejoicing for the holy, a mirror of tranquility: it is a pledge of peace and harmony, for with the aid of the harp the psalm makes one melody from a number of different notes. The beginning of the day hears the sound of the psalm and the end of the day hears its echoes.

In the psalm teaching is combined with charm; for it is sung for pleasure but learnt for instruction. Is there anything that does not come to mind as you read the psalms? It is there that I read: ‘A Song for the Beloved’, and at once I am on fire with a desire for divine love. There too I see the secret of revelations, the evidence of the resurrection, the gifts that have been promised. In the psalms I learn to avoid sin and I forget the shame of sins now repented.

What, then, is the psalm if it is not the musical instrument of virtues, which the holy prophet played with the help of the Holy Spirit, making the earth resound with the delightful melody of heavenly music? Just as this harmonious music is played on the strings and chords of the harp, which are fashioned from the remains of dead animals, and is made into a song of the heavenly tune of divine praise, so the psalmist has taught that we should first

die to sin and then that the various works of virtue should appear in this body. In this way our devotion should be sure to find favor with the Lord.

For this reason David taught that we should sing and praise the Lord in our hearts, just as Paul also sang: ‘I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.’ The psalms teach us to shape our lives and our actions by the study of higher things, so that material pleasures may not arouse our bodily passions, by which the soul is weighed down instead of being redeemed. And the holy prophet said that he sang psalms for the redemption of his soul: ‘I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also which you have rescued.’

## **A reading from the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius X on the Psalter in the Divine Office**

*The sweet sound of the Church’s singing*

From the beginning of the Church, the divinely inspired psalms in the Bible have had a remarkable influence in deepening the devotion of the faithful as they offered to God a continual sacrifice of praise, that is the tribute of lips that acknowledge his name. Moreover, following the custom of the old law, they have played a major part in the sacred liturgy itself and in the divine office.

From this there derived what Saint Basil calls ‘the voice of the Church’, and the psalmody, which our predecessor Urban VIII describes as ‘the daughter of the sacred chant which is sung without ceasing before the throne of God and the Lamb’, the sacred chant which, as Saint Athanasius says, teaches those whose primary concern is the worship of God how they should praise him, and in what words they can glorify him worthily. Saint Augustine puts it beautifully: ‘To show men how to praise him worthily, God first praised himself; and since he has deigned to praise himself, man has discovered how to praise him.’

Moreover, the psalms have the power to fire our souls with zeal for all the virtues. ‘All our scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is divinely inspired and is useful for teaching, as the apostle says. But the book of

psalms is like a garden which contains the fruits of all the other books, grows a crop of song and so adds its own special fruit to the rest': these are the words of Saint Athanasius, and he goes on: 'It seems to me that for him who recites them, the psalms are like a mirror in which a man may see himself and the movements of his heart and mind and then give voice to them.'

Thus in his Confessions Saint Augustine says: ' I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of your Church's singing. These sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart: so that my feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them.'

Who can remain unmoved by the many places in the psalms where the immense majesty of God, his omnipotence, his inexpressible holiness, his goodness, his mercy, his other infinite perfections are so sublimely proclaimed? Who is not similarly stirred by the acts of thanksgiving for God's blessings, by the humble, trusting prayers for favors desired, by the cries of repentance of the sinful soul? Who is not fired with love by the faithful portrait of Christ the Redeemer whose voice Saint Augustine heard in all the psalms, singing, sorrowing, rejoicing in hope, sighing in distress?

**From: PAUL JOHNSON, *The Quest For God, a personal pilgrimage*, N.Y., 1997:**

The world of antiquity understood the value of repetition and persistence in prayer. Every request is a form of prayer, if it be made decently and honorably, and the first prayer recorded in the Old Testament is the prayer of Abraham to God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham asks God to spare the Cities of the Plain if enough righteous men are found there, and the prayer is notable for its persistence and repetition—Abraham first sets the viable figure at fifty, then forty-five, then forty, then twenty, and finally ten. This first prayer was not a formal prayer, but was made on the spur of the moment in response to God's angry intimation that he had punitive plans for the cities. But it had many of the characteristics of a set prayer and that is why the authors of Genesis put it down as they did.

However, among the Ancient Hebrews prayers soon attained permanent form and became, as it were, universal prayers as opposed to particular ones, though they continued to have nuggets of particular history buried in them. The best of them were the form of musical poetry known as psalmody, the psalms employing the Ancient Hebrew poetic device known as parallelism, though they are not strictly speaking in meter, or if they are, we have to yet identified it.

Parallelism is well suited to prayer because it involves an element of repetition. It is of the kind of speech-protocol suitable when addressing a great personage. Thus, **synonymous** parallelism simply repeats the same thought in slightly different words – ‘Hear my crying O God: Give ear unto my prayer.’ In **antithetical** parallelism, the first ‘member’ is contrasted with the second: ‘A merry heart doth good like a medicine: But a broken spirit dries the bones.’ Then there is **synthetic** parallelism, in which the first member is developed by a second, similar thought, or a third. Thus: ‘The kings of the earth stand up: And the rulers take counsel together: Against the Lord and against his Anointed.’ There are further variations of this device, identified by scholars as climactic, introverted, stair-like and emblematic parallelisms, but all of them have the prayer-like characteristics of repetition.

I am going into this detail because that psalms are so important – and beautiful. They are perfect prayers. Considering the oldest of them were probably written well over 3,000 years ago, it is remarkable how many still resonate so powerfully, how many echoes they still find in our hearts, so that we can say or sing them to God in all sincerity, although the circumstances which originally drew them from anguished Hebrew breasts have long since passed away. There are human permanences of hope and despair, sorrow and anger, love, laughter and tears in these ancient prayers which will endure as long as our race.

There are 150 psalms, divided into five groups. Internal evidence of different groupings indicates that these 150 were selected from a larger, probably much larger, number. They are the best, or were thought to be the best. Those who compiled the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Old Testament evidently believed that they were all composed by King David. So did St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, great theologians and scholars and judicious men not easily taken in by pious nonsense. On the other hand, St. Jerome, a closer student of the Bible than either, refused to believe it and so, many



centuries later, did Jean Calvin, who was a keen man for the psalms and made them the centerpiece, almost, of his approved liturgy.

It seems evident now that they were composed by a number of authors at different dates. But some are clearly very ancient and could have been written under the first monarchs of Israel and even by David himself. He was a most remarkable man by any standards, not only a great leader and warrior, but an introspective, imaginative and thoughtful individual who lived on his nerves as well as by his wits and courage: quite likely a poet, in fact, and certainly a musician, as we are told explicitly by that part of the Old Testament which is most reliable for factual accuracy and detail. David believed in public performance and participated in it, and religious poetry set to music was exactly what he liked.

There is, too, an element of state policy in some of the psalms which suggest to me a kingly hand. And the psalmist's zeal for the right often found expression in a passionate desire to see God's vengeance inflicted on the wicked, who are as like as not enemies of state. These Imprecatory Psalms, as they are termed (58, 68, 69, 109, 137, etc.) are distantly reminiscent of the Ancient Egyptian Execration Texts, repetitive and rhythmic cursing-prayers for invoking the wrath of various gods on Pharaoh's enemies (and later, in vulgar use, by individuals against personal enemies) and which reek of paganism at its most distasteful.

The Imprecatory Psalms are potent and gamey stuff too, and when the somewhat mealy-mouthed Anglican bishops prepared the revised Book of Common Prayer in the 1920s, they omitted from public recitation these and similar psalms whose tone of hatred and revenge they considered inconsistent with the spirit of Christianity. This may have been one reason why members of the House of Commons, who took a more robust view of things, rejected the measure in 1928.

The book of Psalms as it has come down to us is a liturgical work for regular, public performance. These prayers are meant to be chanted or sung by an entire congregation, with or without music, and there is little doubt that collectively they formed the official hymn book of the Second Temple, erected after the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile. They were rather like the *Book of Common Prayer or the Stonyhurt Canzonale* which I used at school. When, at the Reformation, the psalms were translated into English and put to music, and roared out by congregations of many thousands at St.

Paul's Cross, immediately outside St. Paul's Cathedral in London, the effect may not have been very different from what took place at the Temple in Jerusalem in the second half of the first millennium BC.

But the transcendent merit of the psalms is that they lend themselves to private, solitary prayer as well as to public performance. Jesus Christ seems to have recited the psalms to himself and he certainly employed ideas from them in his discourses (e.g. the metaphor from Psalm 118 of 'the stone which the builders rejected'). He quoted the psalms (22 and 31) even on the Cross. And it is hard to think of any great man of the early Christian Church, from St. Paul on – or, for the matter, any great rabbi – who did not make continual and extensive use of the psalms. St. Augustine worked out in his lengthy commentary on the psalms that the Christian message is prefigured in almost every one. St. Jerome and St. Ambrose, and many other doctors and teachers, recommended Christians to use the psalms constantly. And they did.

When I was a boy, every priest of the Roman Catholic Church who said the Divine Office from his breviary dutifully got through all the psalms once a week. (This has now been changed: I do not know why – perhaps because priests are thought to be too busy doing others things, like preaching the 'social gospel', etc.) The Anglican liturgy goes through the cycle once a month. Devotion to the psalms cuts across every barrier of religious temperament and affiliation. It was one thing people as diverse as monkish Benedictines and fastidious Puritans, Luther and Francis Xavier, Wesley and Newman, had in common – they loved and continually recited the psalms.

Even more striking was the fact that, over the centuries, the psalms were the daily prayer-fodder of secular men and women as well as ecclesiastics. Warlike knights usually had a little Psalter tucked away among their gear. It slowly became dog-eared as they used it on campaign. Kings and queens had their personal Psalters, very elaborate ones by the leading miniaturists for public display, and much smaller ones, still richly decorated though, for their personal use. These books too, where they survive, often show the marks of continual use.

It seems to me a pity that this habit of reciting the psalms to oneself has lapsed among most people. They still have a huge amount to offer us all, and I am sure that many today, of all ages, both sexes, all kinds of temperament, including those who find regular religious worship distasteful and personal

prayer difficult, would be astonished, if they looked into the psalms, by their relevance and riches. They are, as one poet put it, 'The pastoral heart of England' – and of other lands too.

The psalms, being both public and private, transcend the fundamental division of prayer. In the ancient world, I imagine virtually all prayer was public. The ancients did not like or understand the need for privacy. There was something subversive about the private acts. Even in private, men prayed aloud. They read aloud, always. Silent reading seems to have been unknown in the classical world and came into use only in the second half of the fourth century AD. When St. Augustine first met St. Ambrose, he was struck by the fact that the great Bishop of Milan read to himself: 'His eyes scanned the page, and his mind penetrated its meaning, but his voice and tongue were silent.'

Ambrose certainly prayed silently too. But he saw the point of public prayer better than anyone else in those times. It was St. Ambrose, in the splendid new basilica he completed in Milan in 386, who created the prototype medieval cathedral worship, with daily Mass, regular prayers at morning and evening and sometimes at other periods of the day, and special ceremonies to commemorate the saints according to a strict calendar. To combat Arians and other heretics, and the lingering paganism of the dying classical world, he deliberately dramatized the cathedral services, clothing the priests in splendid vestments, introducing the antiphonal singing of the psalms and new-fangled metrical hymns.

For this singing he employed professional choristers, but he also trained the congregation. He was fighting the Arians with their own weapons, for Arius had been a great writer of propaganda hymns – popular monotheist ditties for guilds of tradesmen, holy marching songs for soldiers, vast numbers of whom had become Arians, and sacred sea-shanties for sailors. So Ambrose wrote his own hymns for Trinitarian Christianity and he had a knack for it. He was the first to put Christian prayers into hymn form, turning them into memorable iambic diameters in four-line stanzas of eight syllables to the line, which could easily be set to music and taught to the congregation. For are still in use.

Thus St. Ambrose began the long and fruitful tradition of Christian liturgical music, with not only the psalms and hymns but even more important, the principal prayers of the Mass – Kyrie, Confiteor, Gloria, Sequence, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei – set to music and

sung by choir or congregation or both. It is impossible to think of Western music without it. First through plain-chant, then through polyphony, finally through orchestrated settings of the Mass for full choir, these prayers became the texts used by most of the greatest composers, from Byrd and Palestrina and Purcell, through Bach and Mozart and Beethoven, then on to Verdi and finally, in our own day, to Britten, to develop musical forms.

It is broadly true to say, from King David's day to this, that prayer created music and music was, until the rise of secular opera, a form of prayer, or its handmaiden. Some held and hold, of course, that prayer and music can be at variance. The Puritans of the sixteenth century argued that elaborate music was a form of vanity which destroyed prayer, that polyphony in particular was an obstacle to sincere prayer. They insisted there could not be more than one note on each syllable of a musical setting of a prayer.

This was not what St. Ambrose had believed. He argued that the length and complexity of a musical setting, and not least its volume, were important elements in public prayer. He specifically approved of harmonics and wrote: 'From the singing of men, women, virgins and children, there is a harmonious volume of sound, like the waves of the ocean.' He thought the volume frightened the devil, while the harmonics and the beauty of the melodic line were pleasing to God. Over the centuries most people have tended to agree with St. Ambrose rather than the Puritans.

The grand musical settings can indeed help us to pray and give us spiritual insights that we might not be able to obtain in any other way. Who has not been uplifted by Bach's B-minor Mass or his settings for the Passion? Who does not feel that the requiem masses composed by Mozart and Verdi enable us to think of the dead, and their relationship with God, more profoundly but also more positively than before we heard the memorial prayers in these sublime settings?

The word 'uplift' is a key one in prayer. The great eight-century Greek-speaking theologian, St. John of Damascus, distinguishes between public and vocal prayer, what he calls 'the decent beseeching of Him', and private silent prayer, which he calls 'the ascent of the mind to God' (*ascensus intellectus in Deum*). By mind, incidentally, St. John did not mean the reason (*ratio*), but the faculty of spiritual vision. An alternative way of putting it is expressed in the phrase *sursum corda*, 'let us lift up the heart'. It is as though

the person praying, silently and internally, not opening his or her mouth, nevertheless almost physically, as it were, sends up unspoken words to God.

And the words must be tied to their thoughts – a point made, in his wicked despair, by Claudius, the bad king in *Hamlet*, who is observed praying in his chapel by the would-be-vengeful Prince:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below  
Words without thoughts never to Heaven go.

This practice of private prayer, or uplifting thoughts to Heaven, is not as old as public communion with God, but it is ancient nonetheless. It was already practiced in Jesus Christ's day, and perhaps he learned it from his holy mother, Mary, who as a young virgin utters a prayer of acceptance the moment she is told by the Angel Gabriel that she is to bear the Son of God: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.' Later, when she visits her cousin Elizabeth, Mary breaks into that exultant prayer we now know as the *Magnificat*, beginning 'My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my savior.'

This spontaneous expression of Mary's joy in her state, with its radical notions of exalting the humble and over-throwing the mighty – so prophetic of the coming message of Christianity – may seem strange coming from the lips of a young virgin. But it has echoes of the psalms too, and we must assume that Mary was brought up in a household where the psalms were frequently, perhaps daily, recited, and had entered its common, everyday language. At all events, these private prayers of Mary, addressed to herself or to a single member of her family, were the precursors of the private prayers which Jesus addressed to God on a number of occasions, notably when he went into the desert to pray for his mission and again, at the end of it, when he prayed alone in the Garden of Gethsemane for strength to endure his coming Passion".