

# Opening Psalms

## The Opening Psalms

As we approach the book of Psalms, it's important to understand that it is an anthology, composed of individual psalms by different people at different times, and put in its current form by some later editor. The two opening psalms set the tone for the entire book.

### An Edited Book

Unlike other books, Psalms makes no claim to come from a single author (Figure 1, chart). David wrote at least 73, but Asaph wrote 12, the sons of Korah 10,<sup>1</sup> Solomon 2, and Moses, Ethan, and Herman 1 each, and the other 50 are anonymous.<sup>2</sup> We can make *three observations* about the book as we have it.

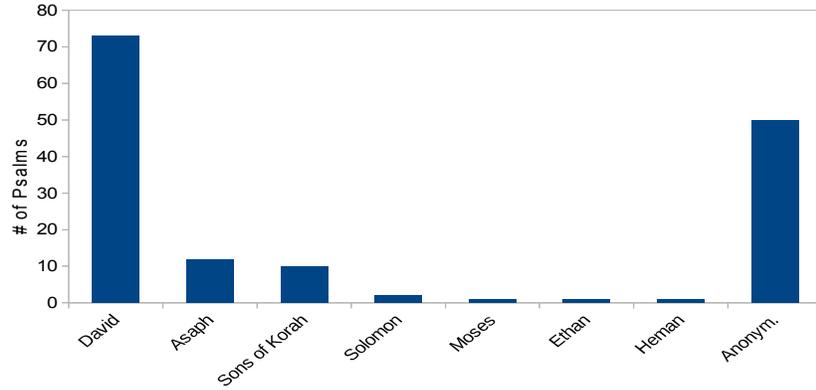


Figure 1: Authors of the Psalms

*First, Psalms is an edited anthology.* Other books may also have drawn on previous documents. Num 21:14 refers to “the book of the wars of the Lord,” and both Josh 10:13 and 2 Sam 1:18 reference “the book of Jasher.” But in these cases, the author has reworded and integrated earlier materials into a coherent structure. The editor of the Psalms did not rewrite or integrate the individual psalms, but left them as independent compositions.

His activity is mostly limited to how he orders them together.

We can date some of the authors (Figure 2, chart). Moses is around 1400. David and Asaph are both around 1000 BC, and Solomon around 950. Some of the anonymous Psalms refer to the Babylonian captivity (600) and the restoration (530):

Psa 85:1 LORD, thou hast been favourable unto thy land: **thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob.**<sup>3</sup>

Psa 126:1 When the LORD

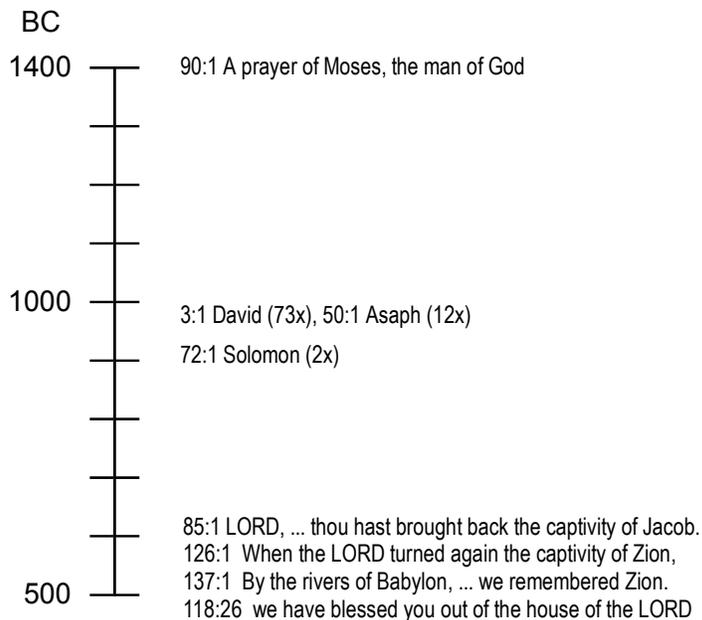


Figure 2: When were the Psalms written?

1 The ascription of Ps 88 to Korah should be associated with 87, per Thirtle  
 2 43, is probably by Korah like 42; Ps 10 is probably a continuation of David's Ps 9, and the NT attributes 2 and 95 to him as well. In addition, if we recognize the Davidic clusters pointed out by Robertson, we may attribute 33, 66, and 67, which fall within these clusters, as David's, and Ps 71 quotes extensively from the Davidic 31. So David goes up to 80 and Korah to 11, while only 42 are left completely anonymous.

## Opening Psalms

turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.

Psa 137:1 **By the rivers of Babylon**, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

And when we studied Psalm 118, we saw reason to associate it with the rededication of the temple under Ezra, after the return from captivity, around 516 BC. So the Psalms were written over a period of nine hundred years, spanning Israel's entire tenure in the land. This leads to our *second observation: Psalms reached its present form after the Babylonian captivity*. Ezra has traditionally been associated with the organization of much of the Jewish canon, and he or his associates may have organized Psalms.

The Psalms are not in chronological order. The oldest Psalm, that by Moses, doesn't appear until 89 others have been given, and those by David appear throughout the Psalter. The earliest bearing his name is Psalm 3, while the latest is 145. This observation leads to our *third observation: whoever organized Psalms had some guiding principle other than chronology*. We will try to discern this principle.

## Two Big Ideas

The first two psalms stand apart. We'll learn that the overall book falls into five main parts, and in the first part only three psalms are not attributed to David.<sup>4</sup> Two of these are Psalms 1 and 2. It's remarkable that Psalm 2 is without a title, because it was considered Davidic by Jews in the first century (chart):

Act 4:24 And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: 25 Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? 26 The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.

Probably these two psalms are without headings anonymous to set them apart, as an introduction to the entire book. They establish two ideas that run throughout the entire book. Each of them has a practical lesson to teach us for our lives today.

### **Psalm 1**

This psalm falls neatly in two three parts, each contrasting a single righteous person with the multitude of the wicked, in the order Wicked, Righteous, Righteous, Wicked, Wicked, Righteous. The terms for the ungodly are all plural; the righteous is singular except for vv. 5-6.<sup>5</sup>

**1 Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.**--The *first contrast* between the righteous man and wicked people is in where they spend their attention. The ungodly focus their

3 See notes for a discussion of the phrase שׁוֹב שְׁבוּת, here translated "bring back the captivity" but often rendered "restore the fortunes" in modern translations.

4 I'm not including Psalm 10, which I will treat as part of Psalm 9. In addition to Psalms 1 and 2, the other is Psalm 33.

5 The Psalm is chiasmatic: the outer two sections correspond in references to standing, the reciprocal attention of the Lord and the Righteous to one another, and the blessing of the righteous and judgment of the wicked.

# Opening Psalms

attention on what their associates think. The godly man meditates on God's law.

These verses take us back to Deuteronomy 6. After telling us that we are to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, and abundance, Moses closely anticipates Ps 1:1-2 (Table 1, chart). Two of the three verbs in v. 1 recall Deut 6:7, while Deut 6:6 describes the meditation of Ps 1:2 and the end of Deut 6:7 anticipates the Psalm's "day and night."

The word "law" in the OT (תורה Strong 8451) is not restricted to legislation, but means "instruction," and applies in its broadest sense to all of God's revelation. Both Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 1 urge us to focus our attention on God's words rather than the thoughts of the ungodly. Solomon reinforces this emphasis on mental hygiene:

Pro 4:23 Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

It is the basis for our Lord's exhortation,

Mat 15:18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. 19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:

**3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. 4 The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.--**The *second contrast* between the righteous and the ungodly is in the fruit of their lives.

The value to plants of being near the water is especially clear in the arid middle east. Along the wadis, even when they are not flowing, the roots of plants reach down to the moisture beneath, and so you can discern the wadis in the desert by the greenery along them (Figure 3, chart).<sup>6</sup>

**5 Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous [pl]. 6 For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous [pl]: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.--**The



Figure 3: Trees growing by the water. By Andrew Shiva / Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28865649>

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah no doubt has Ps 1:3 in mind in 17:5-8.

## Opening Psalms

*third contrast* is in the Lord's judgment of them. When "the judgment" comes, the Lord will acknowledge the righteous, but condemn the wicked. Recall the scene of judgment in Matt 25:31-46, when the Lord separates the sheep from the goats.

The big lesson for us to take away from Psalm 1 is that *the key to succeeding in life (vv. 3-4) and to being well-pleasing to God (vv. 5-6) is to occupy ourselves constantly with the word of God (v. 2) and not with the wisdom of men (v. 1).*

### **Psalm 2**

The second Psalm is the fourth most frequently quoted Psalm in the NT, after 118, 110, and 69.<sup>7</sup> It begins by reporting the rage of the nations against the Lord, then gives the response of the Lord, who has set his chosen king over all the earth. This king then speaks in 7-9, and the Psalmist closes by advising the nations to submit to his rule. The apostles in Acts 4 attribute the Psalm to David.

Throughout this Psalm we find close ties to what we have just read in Psalm 1 (chart). In fact, we can view Psalm 2 as focusing the principles of Psalm 1 from people in general to kings.

**Psa 2:1 Why do the heathen rage, and the people[s] imagine a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, 3 Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.**--As in Psalm 1, the Lord and one righteous man stand against a host of evildoers, but here the righteous man is the anointed king, and the evildoers are political rulers who oppose the Lord and his anointed king. In Psalm 1, the righteous man meditates (הגה, Strong 1897) day and night in the law of the Lord. The heathen rulers also meditate ("take counsel," also הגה), but against the Lord, not with loving attention to his word.

These events fit nicely into David's life. "His anointed" is a title for Israel's king, who here would be David; when tempted to kill Saul, he restrained himself by calling him "the Lord's anointed." Recall that Saul had defeated Nahash king of the Ammonites in 1 Sam 11, a victory he reinforced in 14:47 and that David sealed in 2 Sam 8:12. The relation between Israel and Ammon is described (2 Sam 10:2) as one of חסד, covenant love, suggesting that David had brought Nahash into a peace covenant with him. In 2 Samuel 10, Nahash dies, and David sends a diplomatic envoy to Hanun his son to express his condolences and reinforce the covenant with the next generation, but Hanun's advisors urge him to break off the covenant and assemble an army of Syrians (v. 6) to rise up against David. David apparently wrote this Psalm to settle his thoughts at this critical time in his life. His conclusion will yield a valuable lesson to us.

**4 He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.**--In Psalm 1, the ungodly sat full of scorn, but now the Lord sits in the heavens and mocks his adversaries. An old proverb says, "He who laughs last, laughs best," and those who scorn the Lord should remember that he reserves the last laugh for himself.

**5 Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure. 6 Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.**--The Lord responds to those who resist him, reminding them that his anointed king in Zion rules with his full authority.

**7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I**

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<sup>7</sup> See spreadsheet, PsalmCitationsInTheNT.ods, which summarizes Kirkpatrick's list in the Cambridge Bible, via <http://www.jesuswalk.com/psalms/psalms-NT-quotations.htm>.

## Opening Psalms

**begotten thee.**--Now the king speaks. The righteous man of Psalm 1 takes delight in the law of God, and the anointed king takes delight in the Lord's decree establishing him as the Lord's son. The reference is clearly to 2 Sam 7, where Nathan promised David (chart),

2Sa 7:12 And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom.  
13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.  
14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son.

But there is a subtle shift from v. 1. There, the king is simply called "God's anointed," which can refer to David. But Nathan's prophecy does not call David God's son. This title belongs only to his promised heir.<sup>8</sup> So David's focus has shifted from his personal relation to the rebellious kings of Ammon and Syria, to the victory his descendant, the Messiah, will have over all nations. He does not concentrate on the insult he has received, but focuses his attention on God and his promises.

**8 Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. 9 Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.**--The decree continues. This future king will rule over far more than Ammon and Syria. He will dominate all the earth. Psalm 1 depicted the coming destruction of the wicked with graphic, violent imagery (they are the chaff beaten out of the wheat). Similarly, the kings suffer violent destruction.

In the final paragraph, the Psalmist speaks again. Psalm 1 offered no alternative to the ungodly, but the Psalmist invites the kings to submit themselves to the Messiah. As we have analyzed the Psalm, this is David. Having moved his attention away from the insult he has received and fixed it on the Lord's promises, he harbors no bitterness toward his enemies, but urging them to bow before the Lord whom he serves and the Messiah whom he anticipates.

**10 Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth.**--They think they are the judges, but Ps 1:5 has already warned of the judgment before which they must stand.

**11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little.**--The penalty for kings who persist in rebellion is the same as that for the ungodly, whose "way" shall "perish" (1:6).

**Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.**--Psalm 2 ends as Psalm 1 begins, with a blessing on those who follow the Lord. Like Psalm 1, Psalm 2 begins with a single righteous man but ends with many righteous, as those who submit to the Messiah enjoy his blessing.

The attitude embedded in this Psalm is very much like the one to which Habakkuk arrived at the end of his Psalm, or the one that David will expound in Psalm 16:

Psa 16:8 I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

We can summarize this Psalm: When faced with opposition from other people (vv. 1-3), our confidence must be in the Lord's words (vv. 4-6) and His promised Messiah (vv. 7-9), and we should seek to win our adversaries to serve him (vv. 10-12).

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 89, by Ethan the Ezrahite, does describe David as God's "firstborn" and has him call God "my father" in vv. 26-27, but comes short of calling him "son," and this Psalm may well be written later than 2 Sam 10, the likely occasion of Psalm 2. Whoever Ethan is, he knows of the coming desolations of the Davidic dynasty.

## Opening Psalms

### **Other Torah-King Pairs**

The close links between these two psalms suggests that we are to read them together. They sound two notes that we will hear often throughout the Psalms: the contrast between the righteous (who love God's law) and the wicked (who reject it), and the struggle against and ultimate victory of God's anointed king. This pair of ideas is so important that the compiler has given us two more pairs of Psalms about the torah and the messianic king (chart): Pss 18-19, and 118-119.<sup>9</sup> We will explore these later in detail, but we recognize Pss 19 and 119 as concentrating on God's revelation, and we studied Ps 118 in detail at Easter 2015<sup>10</sup> and saw its Messianic emphasis.

The association of God's law and kingship reminds us of the law of the king, in Deuteronomy. After exhorting the king to avoid the triple challenge of the lust of the flesh (many wives), the lust of the eyes (much silver and gold), and the pride of life (advanced military technology), Moses writes:

Deu 17:18 And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: 19 And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: 20 That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.

The king "whom the LORD thy God shall choose" (v. 15) must be preoccupied with the law of God. Ultimately, the Lord chose David, and instituted the Messianic kingship through him. The first two Psalms emphasize this linkage between the king and God's law, and we will follow these themes throughout the entire book.

In the light of this insight, recall that the first major body of teaching by our Lord in Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, is a recapitulation of the law of Moses. To document our Lord as "Jesus Christ" (Matt 1:1), Matthew emphasizes that he satisfies the requirements of Deuteronomy 17, as summarized in Psalms 1 and 2.

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9 The linkages of these Psalms are explored in detail in J. Grant, *The King As Exemplar: The Function Of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law In The Shaping Of The Book Of Psalms*. Brill, 2004 (PhD thesis, University of Gloucestershire, [http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/3054/1/251881\\_Redacted.pdf](http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/3054/1/251881_Redacted.pdf))

10 <http://cyber-chapel.org/sermons/psalms/notes/Psa118.pdf>

# Opening Psalms

## Notes

### שוב שבות

The traditional translation of this expression, which appears 75x in the OT, mostly in Jeremiah (29x) and Ezekiel (15x). See TDOT for an extensive discussion.

It has been traditional (back to the LXX) to understand שבות as derived from שבה "to take captive," thus "captivity," and to understand the expression as in the KJV. Lately, an alternative derivation from שוב has been proposed, leading to the translation "restore the fortunes." The basis for this translation is the Aramaic expression השובו שיבת on a stele from Sefire from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BD, together with Job 42:10, which applies the expression to Job's restoration. But as TDOT recognizes, it is surprising that the medial *waw* in the root שוב would turn into a *shewa*. (This problem does not arise in Sefire, where the medial vowel is not reduced, but reflected as *yodh*.)

We should note:

- The Sefire inscription deals with the alienation of a piece of property from the writer's family, and its restoration to them. This implies that the family was indeed excluded from its territory, and then restored, so even here the notion of "turn the captivity" fits.
- In Job 2:8, the LXX tells us that the ash-heap where Job sat during his sufferings was outside the city. His sores may in fact have made him technically subject to the law of leprosy:

Lev 13:46 All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.

So it is entirely appropriate to describe his restoration as a return from exile.

We retain the traditional rendering, which means that Ps 85:1 and 126:1 should indeed be understood as post-exilic. The exposition above deals with the instance in Ps 14:7 = 53:7.