

Chapter 22: Psalms

Key Terms

- wisdom and poetic literature: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
- retribution principle: the idea that there is a one-to-one correlation between one's actions and rewards
- monarchy: system of government in which a single ruler (monarch) has complete authority over the affairs of the nation
- theocracy: a state or nation ruled directly by God.
- praise psalm: genre of psalm whose focus is praise for the Lord
- lament psalm: genre of psalm in which a complaint, or lament, is voiced
- wisdom psalm: genre of psalm concerned with wise and righteous living

Key Ideas

- Recognition of the kingship and sovereignty of God.
- Conduct and destiny of the righteous and the wicked.
- God's comfort and defense in times of crisis.
- Importance of praise in all of its variations.
- Role of nature and creation.

Chapter Summary

When speaking about the book of Psalms, we must distinguish between the individual authors and the editor who brought the psalms together and arranged them into their canonical form. Half of the psalms identify David as their author; several other authors are also named, and some psalms remain anonymous. The book of Psalms is divided into five books; close examination of the individual books reveals a purposeful arrangement intended to convey a message. The book was probably compiled in stages over a long period of time.

Most of the psalms can be classified as praise, lament, or wisdom, based on typical characteristics and a consistent format. Though we can observe some similarities between Israelite and Mesopotamian praise and lament, usually involving content and literary style, we also notice distinct differences, involving differing views of God and appropriate modes of worship.

The purpose and message of Psalms can be addressed at the level of the individual author and of the editor/redactor. Many of the psalms were probably written for liturgical use, others in response to historic circumstances, and others as private reflection. The book of Psalms as a whole concerns the vindication of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked, as well as God's commitment to the nation of Israel. The individual and national emphases merge in the person of David, as a righteous man needing vindication and as the ultimate king representing the nation of Israel.

The books of Psalms seem to be grouped thematically: Book I contains mostly laments; Book II focuses on events of David's reign; Book III reflects on the fall of the northern kingdom; Book IV affirms the hope and faith of the exiled people; and Book V emphasizes thanksgiving and praise to Yahweh. The first two psalms of the book introduce two major, recurring themes: the retribution principle and kingship. The book also addresses the relationship between God and nature—an important subject in light of the importance of agriculture in Israelite society and the popular theology of Israel's neighbors.