

## 50. The First Psalms

### Psa 2-41

The Psalms are divided into five groups. The first group are Psalms 1-41. But the first two of the 41 are prefatory, and no book needs two prefaces. It will appear (§59) that Psa 1 is a later addition, leaving 40 in the original group.

40 is the conventional length of a generation, and these Psalms are labeled as by or about David, or referring to events in David's life. Some were written for the dedication of the Temple (as the headnote for Psa 30 specifically states); all were written or overwritten to celebrate David. But many preserve lines which suggest prayers of a more personal kind. Here are a few of those hints of an earlier tradition of prayer and teaching.

#### Against the Wrongdoers

- Psa 5:1** Give ear to my words, O Yahweh  
Consider my meditation . . .
- [4]. For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness;  
Evil shall not sojourn with thee.
- [5] The arrogant shall not stand in thy sight;  
Thou hatest all workers of iniquity.
- [6] Thou wilt destroy them that speak lies;  
Yahweh abhorreth the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

#### Assurance of Justice

- Psa 9:4.** For thou hast maintained my right and my cause;  
Thou sittest in the throne judging righteously.
- Psa 10:2.** In the pride of the wicked, the poor is hotly pursued;  
Let them be taken in the devices that they have conceived.

#### Rescue of the Poor

- Psa 12:2.** They speak falsehood, every one with his neighbor,  
With flattering lip, and with a double heart, do they speak.
- [5] "Because of the oppression of the poor,  
Because of the sighing of the needy,  
Now will I arise," saith Yahweh;  
I will set him in the safety he panteth for."

#### The Unbelievers

- Psa 14:1.** The fool hath said in his heart, "There is no God."  
They are corrupt; they have done abominable works;  
There is none that doeth good.
- [3] They are all gone aside; they are together become filthy,  
There is none that doeth good; no, not one.
- [4] Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge,  
Who eat up my people as they eat bread,  
And call not upon Yahweh?

## The Virtuous Defined and Rewarded

- Psa 15:3.** He that slandereth not with his tongue,  
Nor doeth evil to his friend,  
Nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor;
- [5] He that putteth not out his money to interest,  
Nor taketh reward against the innocent:  
He that doeth these things shall never be moved.
- Psa 23:1** Yahweh is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,  
He leadeth me beside the still waters,  
He restoreth my soul.
- [6] Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me,  
all the days of my life,  
And I will dwell in the house of Yahweh forever.
- Psa 24:3.** Who shall ascend into the hill of Yahweh?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?
- [4] He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart;  
Who hath not lifted up his soul unto falsehood,  
And hath not sworn deceitfully.

## The Adversaries

- Psa 27:2.** When evildoers came upon me to eat up my flesh,  
Mine adversaries and my foes, they stumbled and fell.
- Psa 28:3.** Draw me not away with the wicked,  
And with the workers of iniquity,  
That speak peace with their neighbors,  
But mischief in their hearts.

## Concern for the Poor

- Psa 33:5.** He loveth righteousness and justice;  
The earth is full of the lovingkindness of Yahweh.
- Psa 34:6.** This poor man cried, and Yahweh heard him,  
And saved him out of all his troubles.

## Curses on the Evildoers

- Psa 35:7.** For without cause have they hid for me their net in a pit,  
Without cause have they digged a pit for my soul;
- [8] Let destruction come upon him unawares!  
And let his net that he hath hid catch himself;  
With destruction let him fall therein.
- Psa 36:12.** There are the workers of iniquity fallen,  
They are thrust down, and shall not be able to rise.

## Encouragement to Others

- Psa 37:1.** Fret not thyself because of evildoers,  
Neither be thou envious of them that work unrighteousness,
- [2] For they shall soon be cut down like the grass,  
And wither as the green herb.

### Hope of Forgiveness

- Psa 38:18.** For I will declare mine iniquity;  
I will be sorry for my sin.
- Psa 39:1** I said, I will take heed to my ways,  
That I may not sin with my tongue:  
I will keep my mouth with a bridle,  
While the wicked is before me.
- [12] Hear my prayer, O Yahweh, and give ear unto my cry;  
Hold not thy peace at my tears:  
For I am a stranger with thee,  
A sojourner, as all my fathers were.
- [13] Oh spare me, that I may recover strength,  
Before I go hence, and be no more.

### Conclusion: Yahweh's Response

- Psa 40:1.** I waited patiently for the Lord,  
And he inclined unto me and heard my cry.
- [2] He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay;  
And he set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.
- Psa 41:1** Blessed is he that considereth the poor:  
Yahweh will deliver him in the day of evil.
- [2] Yahweh will preserve him, and keep him alive,  
And he shall be blessed upon the earth;  
And deliver not thou him unto the will of his enemies.

### A Canaanite Psalm<sup>1</sup>

One of these first Psalms was taken direct from the native Canaanite tradition. El was a sky god, giver of rain and storm. This hymn celebrates him in that role.

- Psa 29:3.** The voice of El is upon the waters,  
The god of glory thundereth,  
Even El, upon many waters.
- [4] The voice of El is powerful,  
The voice of El is full of majesty.
- [5] The voice of El breaketh the cedars;  
Yea, El breaketh in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
- [6] He maketh them also to skip like a calf;  
Lebanon and Sirion, like a young wild-ox.
- [7] The voice of El cleaveth the flames of fire.
- [8] The voice of El shaketh the wilderness;  
El shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh . . .

These first Psalms come from prayers of many kinds: hopes for justice, protection from enemies . . . They speak with many voices, including the voices of the Canaanites, the first inhabitants of the land.

<sup>1</sup>For its northern origin, see Terrien 279, and more generally O'Callaghan **Echoes**. The Canaanite god "El," changed by a later editor to "Yahweh," is here restored.