

THE USE OF THE PSALMS

Note: The Old Testament contains many indicators of the Psalms' use, some of which we have noted in the course to date. What follows below is a brief survey of their use in the post-Old-Testament periods. The primary resource for the information below is J. A. Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*. London: Faith, 1962.

A. Synagogue Use¹

The origins of the synagogue are obscure. It surely flourished (if not originated) at a time when the (Second) Temple stood. J. Blau asserts that "the earliest elements...were developed from the Temple service...."² It arose primarily for the instruction, reading, and expounding of the Law, but gradually (especially in areas farther from Jerusalem) it became more and more a place for all aspects of worship.

Use of the psalms in the synagogue followed Temple use in many ways.

- a) In the Daily Service, whole psalms read.
- b) On special occasions, also, whole psalms were read.
- c) Individual verses were read in many services.
- d) Reading cycles (?).
- e) Public responses: repetition of "hallelujah" or "amen" or various doxologies (Ps. 136 is perhaps the best example of this).
- f) Prayers: The Jewish prayer-book has many prayers of quotes from Psalms

B. Intertestamental Use

The *Psalms of Solomon* and the Thanksgiving Hymns (*Hodayot*) from Qumran both quote from the canonical psalms, almost exclusively so, indicating the canonical status of the Psalter, and the corresponding high respect for them.³

C. Use of the Psalms in the New Testament⁴

Jesus, Paul, and the apostles knew and quoted the psalms often. Following are some examples of their use in worship (public or private).

1. Matt. 16:30/Mark 14:26: "When they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives." (Possibly a canonical Psalm.)

¹ Lamb: 10-17

² Blau, in *Jew. Encycl.* 8:137a [quoted in Lamb: 11]

³ Holm-Nielsen, S., "Importance of Late Jewish Psalmody for the Understanding of Old Testament Psalmody Tradition," *Studia Theol* 14 (1960): 1-53; see p. 18.

⁴ Lamb: 18-22

2. I Cor. 14:26: “When you come together, each of you has a psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation. Let all things be done to edify.”(This was probably a canonical psalm.)
3. Eph. 5:18-19: “...be filled of the Spirit, speaking to one another (lit: “yourselves”) in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody of your heart to the Lord.”
4. Col. 3:16: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Note: Whether the three terms here are synonyms or three different types of music, surely the canonical psalms were used.

5. James 5:13: “do any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Do any mercy? Let him sing psalms.” (Private use)

D. Use of the Psalms in the Church⁵

A. In the second century, the evidence for psalms use is sparse.

B. By the third century, the Psalms are rather frequently mentioned.

Origen (185-254 A.D.) mentions both hymns and psalms. Possibly Psalm 34 was used as a Communion Hymn in Origen’s time, because it states in v. 8: “Oh taste and see that the LORD is good.”⁶

Tertullian (155-223 A.D.) spoke of psalms in public worship and said they were taken over from the synagogue.

C. In the Post-Nicene period, Psalms were very popular and they are frequently mentioned in writings from the period.

Chrysostom mentioned psalm singing in public meetings, and Psalm 141 being used as an evening psalm. Later, Psalm 63 was used as the morning psalm.

Augustine made many mentions of psalms in public worship. He said that they might be sung at any time in the service, except when other items of worship actually were proceeding.

E. The Reformation

Many changes were introduced at this time. Hymns began to replace psalms in the Roman worship (see Lamb on Luther).

Calvin encouraged use of psalms in worship. The Geneva Psalter of 1562 made its way to Scotland, and influenced the long line of metrical Psalters from there.

⁵ C. H. Bullock, Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books (Chicago: Moody, 2nd ed., 1988): 149-50.

⁶ Lamb: 26-27.

Still today the Psalter continues as the most popular Biblical book in Christian worship, both public and private.