



A Commentary on
The Book of Psalms

Translated from the Latin of
Saint Robert Bellarmine

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Preface¹

1. Before we come to the explication of the individual Psalms, it seems that a few things should be explained. First, *concerning the excellence* of the Psalms; second, *concerning the terms "Psalm" and "Psaltery"*; third, *concerning the division and ordering of the Psalms*; fourth, *concerning the author*.

2. Their *excellence*, to be sure, can be understood to derive both from the subject matter and also from the form and kind of the writing. The Book of Psalms, in fact, is a sort of compendium and summation of the entire Old Testament; whatever Moses either handed down in history or taught in the Law, and whatever the other prophets wrote, either exhorting men to virtue or foretelling the future, all of this is contained in the briefest compass in the Psalms of David. For in Psalms 8, 77, 103, 104, 134 and others, the creation of the world, the deeds performed by the patriarchs, the Egyptian captivity, the plagues in Egypt, the wandering of the people in the desert, the entrance into the Promised Land and other things are splendidly set forth by this kind of writing. In Psalm 118 the Law given by God is extolled with wonderful praises, and all men are incited to keep it. In Psalms 2, 15, 21, 44, 68, 71 and others, Christ's kingship, His origin, His preaching and miracles, His Passion, Resurrection and Ascension, and the growth of the Church are so manifestly foretold, that the sacred author seems to have been an evangelist rather than a prophet. Finally, in Psalm 1 and in almost all of those following, he exhorts the listeners to virtue, restrains them from vice, invites, attracts, threatens and frightens them; and all of these things are not simply set down in a narrative, but in various sorts of songs, with poetic phrases and many admirable metaphors, until at last this new form of expression snatches up souls in such love and praise of God, that nothing sweeter, nothing more salutary could ever be sung or heard. Therefore Saint Basil is correct when he writes in his commentary on the first Psalm, that the Psalms of David draw tears even from a heart of stone; and Saint John Chrysostom rightly affirms in his commentary on Psalm 137 that those who sing the Psalms properly lead choirs together with the angels and, as it were, vie with them in the praise and love of God.

3. We come now to the terms *Psalms* and *Psaltery*. To us *Psaltery* means *the book of the Psalms*; Saint Augustine, for instance, uses the term thus in Letter 140 to Audax when he says, "*I do not have the Psaltery translated from the Hebrew by Saint Jerome.*" So too Saint Jerome, in the Letter to Sophronius on the Order and Titles of the Psalms, remarks: "*I know that some people think the Psalter is divided into five books.*" But in the Sacred Scriptures, *Psaltery* is a musical instrument drawn up with ten strings, which in Hebrew is called *nebel*. Saint Basil in his commentary

¹ St. Robert Bellarmine's Preface, which did not appear in the edition translated by Father O'Sullivan, was translated by Michael J. Miller from the critical edition of 1931 as published by the Gregorian University.

on the first Psalm and Saint Augustine in his commentary on Psalm 32 inform us that the *psaltery* differs from the harp and the lyre in that the harp and the lyre emit sound from their lower part, whereas the psaltery produces tones in its higher part. Saint Hilary, in his Prologue to the Psalms, adds that the *psaltery* was a straight instrument, without any curve or bend. Very frequent mention is made of this instrument in the Holy Bible, and Psalm 32 speaks of it in verse 2: *Sing to [the Lord] with the psaltery, the instrument of ten strings.*

Psalm, in Hebrew *mizmor*, means *song* or *tone*; it is derived from the verb *zamar*, which signifies both *to sing* and also *to play the harp* or *the psaltery*, in precisely the same way as the verb *psallô* in Greek. As for the meaning of *psallendi manibus*, that is, “striking an instrument”, we find an instance of the phrase in 1 Kings 16, 16: “*Thy servants... will seek out a man skillful in playing on the harp, that when the evil spirit from the Lord is upon thee, he may play with his hand, and thou mayest bear it more easily.*” The same is found in chapters 17, 18 and elsewhere. As for the meaning of *psallendi voce*, that is, “singing”, we find it in Psalm 32:3, “*Sing well unto Him with a loud noise*”; it is also used by the apostle in 1 Cor. 14:15, “*I will sing with the spirit; I will sing also with the understanding,*” that is, I shall sing with the spirit or breath of my mouth, singing in a bodily voice the praises of God; and I shall sing with the spirit of my heart, desiring and loving the glory of the selfsame God. Moreover, according to Saint Hilary and Saint John Chrysostom, each of whom authored a Prologue to the Psalms, there is this difference between *Psalm* and *Canticle*, and between *Psalmum Cantici* and *Canticum Psalmi*: that a *Psalm* is the sound of a musical instrument alone without any human voice singing, whereas a *Canticle* is the voice of a singer without instrumental accompaniment; *Psalmus Cantici* [“psalm of a canticle”] is said when the *canticle* is sung first and the *psalm tone* follows: *Canticum Psalmi* [“canticle of a psalm”] when a singing voice is heard imitating the instrumental tone which went before. Furthermore, not any song or musical tone whatsoever can be termed “Psalms of David”, but rather those by which are sung either the praises of God or prayers to God or an exhortation to virtue, and not empty fables or wanton loves or the flattery of princes. Hence the Book of Psalms is entitled in Hebrew *sepher thehillim*, that is, *book of hymns* or *divine praises*; and after the conclusion of Psalm 71, the last of all those which David sang, we read: *The praises of David are ended*, that is, *David’s prayers*. The Psalms, as a whole, contain either the praises of God or prayers to God, or both at once; although there are some which are entirely devoted to exhorting men to virtue, such as the first and second Psalms, etc.

4. Now as for what pertains to *the division and order* of the Psaltery: the Hebrews divide the Psaltery into five books, as Saint Jerome testifies both in the Prologue Galeato and also in the Letter to Sophronius cited above [in no. 3]; wherever *Amen, Amen* is written at the end of a Psalm, they reckon that a book is ended at that place; *Amen, Amen* is written at the end of Psalms 40, 71, 88 and 105, and to these four books they add a fifth extending from Psalm 106 to Psalm 150. Yet this Hebrew tradition is not in conformity with Sacred

Scripture, and therefore it is refuted by the same Saint Jerome in the Letter to Sophronius which we have mentioned above, and also by Saint Hilary in his Prologue to the Psalms. The title at the head of the Psalter, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Septuagint edition, is *the book of hymns*; and in Luke 20:42 the Lord Himself speaks, saying, "*David himself saith in the book of Psalms: The LORD said to my Lord...*"; and in Acts 1:20 Saint Peter speaks, saying, "*It is written in the book of Psalms: Let their habitation become desolate, etc.*"

Furthermore the *order* of the Psalms is not arranged according to the time at which they were written. It suffices to note that Psalm 3 was written when David was fleeing persecution by his son Absalom; indeed, Psalm 50 had been written much earlier, evidently when the same David was rebuked by Nathan for his crime of adultery and murder; Psalm 141, moreover, had been written still earlier, undoubtedly when the same David was lying hidden in a cave for fear of King Saul; and Psalm 143 had been written long before, to wit, when David fought Goliath the giant: finally it is probable, or almost certain, that Psalm 71 is the latest of all chronologically, since it was written when Solomon had already begun to reign, and after this Psalm is added: *The praises of David, son of Jesse, are ended*; and nevertheless we see this Psalm, not in the last place, but situated almost in the middle. Therefore it is not easy to discern why the Psalms are arranged as we now find them. Nevertheless we should not reject the opinion or suspicion of those who say that the first fifty Psalms, of which the last is *Have mercy on me, O God*, pertain to penitents or *beginners* in the spiritual life; the next fifty, which end with the Psalm, *Mercy and judgment I will sing to Thee, O Lord*, pertain to the just or the *proficient*; and the final fifty which conclude with the Psalm, *Praise ye the Lord in His holy places*, pertain to men who are accomplished or the *perfect*: the Psalms were so arranged either by Esdras, as Saint Athanasius seems to think in his Synopsis, or else the Septuagint translators, as Saint Hilary teaches in his Prologue to the Psalms.

5. The question remains as to *the author* of the Psalms. There are two opinions among the Church Fathers: on the one hand Saint Athanasius in his Synopsis, Saint Hilary in the Prologue to the Psalms, and Saint Jerome in his Letter to Sophronius on the Order of the Psalms and in his Letter to Cyprian in which he interprets Psalm 89, maintain that there are various authors of the Psalms, for instance all those who are named in the titles, *David, Moses, Solomon, Asaph, Idithun* and others. To the contrary, Saint John Chrysostom, Theodoret, Euthymius and Cassiodorus in the Preface to the Commentaries on the Psalms, and Saint Augustine in Book 17 of *The City of God*, chapter 14, acknowledge David to be the sole author of all the Psalms. We can be sure of three things. First, the primary author of all the Psalms is the Holy Spirit; the apostle Peter testifies to this in Acts 1:16, and likewise the apostle Paul in Heb. 3:7; and David himself in 2 Kings 23:1 says, "*The Spirit of the Lord hath spoken by me, and His word by my tongue*"; and in Psalm 44:1, "*My tongue is the pen of a scrivener that writeth swiftly.*" Therefore, whether David or Moses or someone else composed the Psalms, they themselves were like writing instruments,

whereas the Holy Spirit was the One Who wrote by means of them. Truly, what need is there to dispute about the pen, when one is sure about the writer? Second, to me it seems certain that the greater part of the Psalms are by David; for at the end of Psalm 71 we read: "*The praises of David, son of Jesse, are ended.*" In the same way in the Second Book of Kings, chapter 23, verse 1 it says: David was "*the excellent psalmist of Israel*"; finally in 2 Par. 5 it says: "*Singers had been appointed to sing the Psalms which David made*". Third, it appears to me to be proven that the Psalms lacking titles are by David, as well as all those which bear the name *David* in their titles, whether it is written *Of David* or *For David*; for Psalm 2 lacks a title, and nevertheless in Acts 4:25 the apostles affirm that it is a Psalm composed by David: and Psalm 94 lacks a title in the Hebrew version, and the apostle attributes it to David in Heb. 4:7. Furthermore, the Psalms which lack titles in the Hebrew codex are ascribed in the Greek text to David; accordingly it may be believed that the titles which were in the Hebrew codex were excised when the Septuagint translators rendered the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek language. Finally the rule of the Hebrews, who say that a Psalm which lacks a title is by the author who wrote the previous one, is proven to be false; for according to this rule, the first and second Psalms would have no author, since both lack a title. Besides, Psalm 89 is ascribed to Moses, and the ten following Psalms, which lack titles, would have to be ascribed to Moses as well. But this cannot be done, since Psalm 98 makes mention of Samuel, who was born quite a long time after the death of Moses. Several difficulties of this sort appear when one tries to explain the title of Psalm 89. That not only those Psalms are by David which have *Of David* in the title, but also those which have *For David*, is proved by Saint Augustine from Psalm 109, which has: *tô David, ipsi David*; and yet Our Lord says in Matt. 22:43: "*How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying: The Lord said to my Lord?*"

And so these things concerning the author of the Psalms seem to me to be certain. As for the remaining Psalms which bear the title *Moses* or *Solomon* or *Asaph* or *Idithun* or *Ethan* or *the sons of Core*: I consider as acceptable the opinion of Athanasius, Hilary and Jerome, but more probable that of Chrysostom, Augustine, Theodoret and of others who followed them. Why do I think that the later opinion is preferable? The reason is that it is more common and was even more common a thousand years ago. Saint Augustine testifies to this in Book 17 of *The City of God*, chapter 14, and Theodoret in the Preface to the Psalms. Similarly, since it is sufficiently well established that Asaph, Idithun, Ethan and the sons of Core were singers rather than prophets, it follows that the Psalms were attributed to them in the titles because they were given to them to sing, not because they themselves had composed them; which can be understood from the fact that in the same title sometimes the name *David* is placed with that of *Idithun*, or of another, as can be seen in the titles of Psalms 38, 61, 64, 136, 137 and 138. In conclusion let it be added that in Luke 20:41, where the Lord says, "*David himself saith in the book of Psalms,*" that He seems to attribute the entire book of the Psalms to David.