

Book of the Bible: Psalms

Based on the *NIV Study Bible, Introductions to the Books of the Bible, Psalms*

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Title

The titles "Psalms" and *Psalter* come from the pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT, the *Septuagint*, where the terms originally referred to songs sung with instruments. The traditional Hebrew title is *tehillim* (meaning "praises"; see Ps 145 title), even though many of the psalms are *tephillot* (meaning "prayers").

Collection, Arrangement and Date

The Psalter is a collection of song that were collected during a process that spanned centuries. It was put into its final form by *postexilic* temple scribes, completed about the third century b.c. As such, it has often been called the prayer book of the "second" temple (*Zerubbabel's* and *Herod's*) and was used in the synagogues as well. It is more than a treasury of prayers and hymns for use on chosen occasions. Both the its subject matter and the arrangement of the collection suggest that this collection was viewed as a book of instruction in the faith and godliness, a guide for life of faith in accordance with the Law, the Prophets and wisdom literature.

The formation of Psalters probably goes back to the early days of the first or Solomon's temple when the temple liturgy began to take shape. We have already referred to "the prayers of David." Other collections referred to in the Psalter titles are:

- (1) the songs and/or psalms "*of the Sons of Korah*" (Ps 42–49; 84–85; 87–88),
- (2) the psalms and/or songs "*of Asaph*" (Ps 50; 73–83) and
- (3) the songs "*of ascents*" (Ps 120–134).

Other collections. Ps 1–41 (**Book I**) make frequent use of the divine name Yahweh ("the LORD"), while Ps 42–72 (**Book II**) make frequent use of Elohim ("God"). The reason why these psalms were collected this way is a matter of speculation. Ps 93–100 is a traditional collection, with use of the common phrase *The Lord reigns* (in 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1). Other groupings include Ps 111–118 (a series of *Hallelujah* psalms), Ps 138–145 (all of which include *of David* in their titles) and Ps 146–150 (with the phrase *Praise the Lord*).

In its final edition, the Psalter contained 150 psalms. The Psalter was divided into five Books:

- *Book I* Ps 1–41;
- *Book II* 42–72;
- *Book III* 73–89;
- *Book IV* 90–106;
- *Book V* 107–150).

The division of the psalms into five Books was possibly an imitation of the five books of Moses (otherwise known simply as the Law). In spite of this five-book division, the Psalter was seen as a whole, with an introduction (Ps 1–2) and a conclusion (Ps 146–150).

Authorship and Titles (or Superscriptions)

Of the 150 psalms, only 34 do not have a *superscription*. These psalms are found mainly in Books III–V, where they tend to occur in groups, such as: Ps 91; 93–97; 99; 104–107; 111–119; 135–137; 146–150. In Books I–II, only Ps 1–2; 10; 33; 43; 71 lack titles.

The contents of the superscriptions vary but fall into a few broad categories:

1. *author*,
2. *name of collection*,
3. *type of psalm*,
4. *musical notations*,
5. *liturgical notations*,
6. *brief indications of occasion for composition*.

There is some disagreement on how old and how reliable some of these inscriptions are. Many of them are preexilic, but it is agreed that they are not part of the original psalm and were added after the psalms were written, and may not be accurate.

1. *Superscriptions regarding occasion of composition.* Many of these brief notations of events read as if they had been taken from 1 and 2 Samuel. It is sometimes hard to match up the title with the content of the psalms they head. They are probably later attempts to fit the psalms into the real-life events of history. The Hebrew phraseology used means generally *belonging to*, but it can also have the sense of *concerning* or *for the use of or dedicated to*. The name sometimes refers to the title of a collection of psalms that had been gathered under a certain name, such as *Of Asaph* (Ps 50; 73–83) or *Of the Sons of Korah* (Ps 42–49; 84–85; 87–88).

There can be little doubt that the Psalter contains psalms composed by David. This, however, may also include psalms written concerning or about David, or about one of the later Davidic kings, or even psalms written in the style of the psalms that David wrote. Some “Davidic” psalms seem clearly to reflect later situations (see, e.g., Ps 30 title; see Ps 69 and Ps 122 title).

2. *The word Selah.* This word is found in 39 psalms, all but two of which are in Books I–III (Ps 140; 143, both “Davidic”). There are many suggestions for its meaning, but the meaning is lost to history. Most likely, it is a liturgical notation that it calls for a brief musical interlude or for a brief response by the congregation are plausible.

Psalm Types

1. *Hebrew superscriptions to the Psalms.* These superscriptions acquaint to an ancient system of classification:

1. *mizmor* (“psalm”);
2. *shiggaion* (see Ps 7 title);
3. *miktam* (see Ps 16 title);
4. *shir* (“song”);
5. *masvkil*;
6. *tephillah* (“prayer”);
7. *tehillah* (“praise”);
8. *lehazkir* (“for being remembered”—i.e., before God, a petition);
9. *letodah* (“for praising” or “for giving thanks”);
10. *lelammed* (“for teaching”);
11. *shir yedidot* (“song of loves”—i.e., a wedding song).

The meaning of many of these terms, however, is uncertain. In addition, some titles contain two of these, indicating that they are diverse and overlapping.

2. *Genre and Analysis of content.* An analysis of the content of the psalms has given rise to a classification that is useful for study of the Psalms. A few of the main types that can be identified are:

1. **Wisdom (instructional) psalms** (e.g., Ps 1; 34; 37; 73; 112; 119; 128; 133).
2. **The Lament**, begins with a complaint, but often conclude with praise. Within a lament you may find several of the following elements: (a) invocation, (2) plea to God for help, (3) complaints, (4) confession of sin or assertion of innocence, (5) curse of enemies (imprecation), (6) confidence in God's response, and (7) hymn or blessing. Examples include: Psalm 3, 7, 13, 25, 22, 42–43, 44, 51, 74, 79, 80 and many others.
3. **Thanksgiving Psalms.** These are similar to hymns, but particularly recount what God has done. There are three main aspects to Thanksgiving Psalms: 1) praise for a deed God has done or an experience of God by the Psalmist; 2) it is an immediate response evoked by God's action; 3) the tone is one of joy. Examples include: Psalms 18, 30, 32, 34
4. **Psalms of Confidence**, an expression of the psalmist's trust in God's goodness and power. Examples include Psalms 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 91, 121, 125, 131.
5. **Psalms of Remembrance** make reference to the great redemptive acts of the past, particularly the Exodus (Psalm 77:16) and the establishment of the Davidic covenant and dynasty (Psalms 89, 132).

Examples are found in Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136.

6. **Kingship Psalms** focus on two kings: (1) the human king of Israel (Psalms 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 132) and (2) God as king (Psalms 47, 98). There is also a messianic theme throughout the Psalms collection that looks forward to the coming Davidic king, especially in Psalms 2 and 110.
7. **Hymns** are to praise God because He *is* God, and we know He is because we have cried to Him and He has acted. (e.g., Ps 8; 19; 29; 65; Ps 47; 93–99)
8. **Imprecatory Psalms** or **Cursing Psalms** are a more radical version of the lament. In these psalms, there are curses pronounced on those who have caused the crisis. Sometimes these are people within the community who have committed injustice, and sometimes people outside who, like the Babylonians, have invaded the country and brought destruction on the nations (Psalm 137)
9. **Penitential Psalms**, prayers specifically for forgiveness from sins committed (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143).
10. **Songs of Zion, the city of God** (Ps 46; 48; 76; 84; 122; 126; 129; 137);
11. **Royal psalms**, concern the king, the Lord's anointed (e.g., Ps 2; 18; 20; 45; 72; 89; 110);

Although *Penitential* and *Imprecatory* psalms can be seen as a distinct psalm type, there is no real basis in the Psalter collection itself. The *penitential* refers to an early Christian selection of seven psalms (6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143) for expressions of penitence; the *Imprecatory* psalms are based on a misunderstanding of one of the speech functions found in the prayers. What are actually appeals to the heavenly Judge for judicial redress (function 8 noted above) thought to be curses ("imprecation" means "curse") spoken by the psalmists on their adversaries.

Literary Features

The Psalms are poetry. They are rich in images, in simile and metaphor. Using similar sounds, using the same letter to start a verse and wordplays abound in the Hebrew text. Use of repetition and the piling up of synonyms fill out the picture.

Hebrew poetry does not use rhyme and regular meter. Its most distinctive feature is parallelism. Most poetic lines are composed of two or three balanced stanzas of thought. What is rhymed is the thought or concept, not the word.

Within the verse, the second line:

- *echoes* the first line (synonymous parallelism): Oh my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth (Psalm 78:1)
- *contrasts* the first line (antithetic parallelism): The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly (Pr. 15:2)
- *completes* the first line (synthetic parallelism): I have installed my King, on Zion, my holy hill (Ps. 2:6)

These three types are generalizations and do not describe the rich variety that the creativity achieved in the basic two-segment line structure. When the second or third stanza of a poetic line repeats, echoes or overlaps the content of the preceding segment, it usually intensifies or more sharply focuses the thought or its expression. They can serve, however, as rough distinctions that will assist the reader.

There are also psalms where the author starts each line with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet (as in Ps 111–112), a single line (as in Ps 25; 34; 145), or two lines (as in Ps 37), or eight lines (as in Ps 119). In addition Ps 33; 38; 103 each have 22 lines, no doubt because of the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

Laments comprise the largest category found in the Book of Psalms. There are forty individual lament psalms and at least twelve communal or national lament psalms. These psalms follow a specific pattern:

1. Invocation of God's Name.
2. Description of present need.
3. Prayer for help and deliverance, usually imperative tense.
4. Reasons why God should help the one(s) praying.
5. Vow to offer praise or sacrifice when the petition is heard.
6. Grateful praise to God. (This is usually in the past tense, as if the requested were already granted.)

Thanksgiving Psalms

1. Summary of the Testimony of the Psalmist
 - a) recalls plea for help
 - b) recounts God's intervention
2. Narration of the Psalmist's experience
 - a) the original problem
 - b) the cry for help
 - c) God's deliverance
3. Acknowledgment of God's aid in Praise/Thanks
 - a) worship, with praise, sacrifice, blessings
 - b) cry of praise

Hymns

- I. Call to Praise
 - a) uses an imperative
 - b) addressed to the community (plural)
- II. Reason for Praise
 - a) "because" or "for"
 - b) God described with participial clause, "God, who [activity]"
 - c) God's deliverance
- III. Renewed Call to Praise (balances beginning)
 - a) uses an imperative
 - b) addressed to the community (plural)