

Introduction to Psalms

Where is it in the Bible?

Psalms is the nineteenth book of the Old Testament in Christian Bibles and comes between Job and Proverbs. In Hebrew Bibles, Psalms is the first book in the last section, the Writings or Kethuvim.

What is it about?

In general, the word *psalm* refers to a sacred song or hymn. It comes from the Greek word *psalmos*, a song to be sung accompanied by a stringed instrument; it is related to the verb *psallein*, meaning “to pluck”. Another name for the book of Psalms is the Psalter. This word comes from the Greek word for a stringed instrument, probably a lyre. The Hebrew name for this book is *Tehillim*, which means “song of praise” and has the same root as *Hallelujah*.

Throughout history, believers have used this book as a source and model of prayer and praise for worship. This is still true today. Martin Luther viewed the Psalms as “a little Bible” because he thought that the basics of faith, including Christ, were to be found there. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms “the prayer book of the Bible”. In it, God not only speaks to us; we also speak to God; this makes it unique among biblical books.

Who wrote it?

Ancient tradition identifies David as the author of the book of Psalms. This is supported by connections between David and music that are found in the historical books. For example, 1 Samuel 16:17-23 describes how David soothed Saul by playing the lyre. In addition, many of the psalms include a superscription which indicates that the psalm is “of David.” However, the superscriptions are not original, and the phrase in Hebrew does not necessarily mean that David was the author of the psalm; it indicates that it was in some way associated with David. Furthermore, the historical background of some of the psalms makes it impossible for David to have written them. Modern scholars view the book as a collection of psalms that were composed by many unidentified authors and then gathered together.

When was it written?

Dating the book of Psalms is extremely difficult since the individual psalms come from times throughout the history of Israel, much like modern hymnals contain hymns from the early days of Christianity to the present. Psalms 1-89 seem to have been the first to be finalized since there are fewer variations in them than in the rest among the Dead Sea scrolls.

How is it structured?

Up until the early 20th century, psalms were viewed as individual units. This changed when Hermann Gunkel pointed out that various types of psalms could be identified. The major types are described below, but this list is not exhaustive and some psalms are difficult to classify.

- Lament of an individual – most common type, also known as a complaint or a prayer for help; examples: 3, 22, 51, 130
- Thanksgiving of an individual – thanksgiving for delivery from a specific problem or situation; examples: 32, 66, 116

- Lament of the community – often includes recollections of what God has done in the past; examples: 44, 80, 137
- Hymn or song of praise – although the first three types often include praise, this type is exclusively for praise; examples: 8, 103, 145-150
- Royal – concerns an Israelite or Judean king or monarchy and seem to have been composed for specific events; examples: 2, 45, 72
- Instructional or wisdom – written to teach the community about living God's way; examples: 1, 19, 119

The Hebrew text of Psalms divides it into five smaller books, perhaps in imitation of the five books of the Torah. Some of these books contain smaller subdivisions. The psalms at the end of the first four sections include a doxology and the word *amen*; Psalm 150 is the doxology for the entire book of Psalms.

- I. Book I (Psalms 1-41) – The first two Psalms serve as an introduction to the book of Psalms as a whole. Except for Psalm 10 and Psalm 33, the rest are ascribed to David. Most of these psalms are individual laments.
- II. Book II (Psalms 42-72) – These psalms are attributed to a variety of people including the Korahites, Asaph, David, and Solomon. Once again the dominant type is the individual lament.
- III. Book III (Psalms 73-89) – Many of these psalms are attributed to musicians, including the Korahites and Asaph. There is a mixture of types
- IV. Book IV (Psalms 90-106) – Many of these psalms have no attribution, although Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses and Psalms 101 and 103 to David. This book is dominated by psalms of praise.
- V. Book V (Psalms 107-150) – This section includes the longest psalm (119) and the Songs of Ascent (120-134) which were sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem. There are several psalms attributed to David and one to Solomon (127).

What are some things to look for?

- **Parallelism:** "Psalms are poems, and the most characteristic feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. ... Parallelism has been called a rhyme of meaning, rather than the rhyme of sound that is characteristic of much English poetry. One line develops, enhances, and extends the thought of the other line. It might do this by using a similar grammatical construction (Psalm 103:10), rewording the thought in another way (Psalm 69:3), balancing a positive idea with a negative one (Psalm 37:21), or pairing commonly associated words-"people" in one line, for example, and "nations" in the next (Psalm 111:6), or "justice" and "righteousness" (Psalm 72:1). ... The biblical word becomes richer and stronger through this repetition and extension. Parallelism can function not only within individual verses (or neighboring verses) but also over longer units of a text."¹
- **Steadfast Love of God:** Even in psalms of lament, the psalmists give thanks for God's steadfast love, loyalty, and faithfulness. The Hebrew word for this is *hesed*, and it occurs over 120 times in the book of Psalms.

¹ Fred Gaiser at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=39>