# Psalms

The book of Psalms is Israel’s equivalent to a hymnbook and a book of prayers. Like a hymnbook, it includes songs of praise that Israel would have used in its worship. Like a prayer book, it includes examples of ways in which Israelites could come to God with their pleas for him to act in their lives.

## Name and Canonical Context

The word *psalm* comes from a Greek term for plucking an instrument like a guitar, which suggests that psalms would typically be sung to instrumental accompaniment. The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is *Tehillim*, a word whose background suggests it implies making an enthusiastic noise, so that it points to another aspect of the way psalms would be used in worship. In English, the book of Psalms can also be called the Psalter.

The book of Psalms comes near the middle of the Christian Old Testament, between Job on one side and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs on the other. These books’ poetic form of means that they contrast with the preceding books, which consist mostly of stories looking backward at Israel’s history and of rules (laws) for Israel’s life. Following these books are the Prophets, who challenge Israel about its life in the present and urge Israel to live in light of what God intends to do in its life and in world history. The Psalms focus more narrowly on people’s relationship with God in the present, in light of how good life is or how hard it is.

In the Jewish order of the Scriptures, the books come in a different sequence, as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. Psalms is the opening book in the third section, to be followed by Job, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, and others. In this order, the earlier books look back at Israel’s history and lay down rules for its life, and also challenge Israel about how its life should be in light of what God intends to do. It is after these books that the Jewish order comes to Psalms with their talk about the joyful and the hard side of a relationship with God.

In both sequences, whereas the stories involve human narrators speaking to other human beings, while the laws and the prophets involve God speaking to people, the Psalms are distinctive because they involve human beings speaking to God. Whereas the rest of the Scriptures tell people what God has done, who God is, and what they should do, the Psalms give them examples of the way people can talk to God.

In the broader, deutero-canonical context of the Old Testament that includes other books that appear only in the Septuagint, psalms feature as background to the praise and prayer that is prominent in the life of Tobit, and also (for instance) in Judith, the Prayer of Azariah, the Prayer of Manasseh, and Sirach. In the New Testament. Ephesians, Colossians, and James urge people to sing psalms and other spiritual songs, which will be psalm-like acts of praise that refer to Jesus. The New Testament treats the Psalms as a key resource for understanding God and understanding Jesus.

## Authorship and Date

Most of the Psalms have headings, brief introductions comprising phrases such as “to the leader” or “a song for the Sabbath day” or “a psalm of David.” That last heading sounds as if it implies that David wrote the psalm in question, and the book of Psalms was traditionally called “The Psalms of David.” But that title does not appear in the book itself, and the headings are more ambiguous than they may sound. In the NRSV, the heading to Psalm 11 is “To the leader. Of David.” But the Hebrew word translated “to” and “of” is the same (*le*) and one could as easily translate the heading “Of the leader. To David.” So whereas “of David” might sound as if it identifies him as the author, it is actually a more open-ended expression. It could mean *for* David or *about* David or *to* David. Further, while many of the headings do refer to David, similar references to David appear in psalms among the Qumran Scrolls, which were written centuries after David. In the ancient world as in the modern world, it was possible to attach the name of a notable figure to something to indicate the tradition it belonged to, to commend it, and to encourage people to read it. It did not imply this person’s authorship.

So the references to David in the headings to psalms do not imply that he wrote them. Actually, we do not know anything about who wrote them. Recognizing that the introductions do not tell us who wrote them does open up the possibility that women as well as men composed psalms. The Old Testament does describe women as the authors of psalm-like compositions (e.g., Judges 5, 1 Samuel 2).

Although we do not know who wrote the Psalms, some provide clues about when they were written. Ones that refer to a king suggest the period of the monarchy, which ended in 587 BCE. Battles often feature in the psalms, which suggests the nation’s life in the centuries before 587 when Israel was an independent nation. Some psalms refer to the time when many Israelites had been forced migrants in places like Babylon, which suggests that they come from after 587. Like Christian hymns, however, psalms could be supplemented or brought up to date as years passed, which complicates the question of their date of composition.

If we can’t say much about when many psalms were written, this makes little difference to understanding them. Worshipers do not usually know who wrote their hymns and worship songs but it does not take away from using them for praise and prayer. Indeed, not knowing when psalms were written or who wrote them can have a positive effect. It means they are not tied to a context or an author.

In English translations, the introductions to psalms don’t have verse numbers, but in printed Hebrew Bibles they do. As a result, modern books often use a format for references such as “Psalm 3:2 [3]” which incorporates both systems. In addition, Psalms 9 and 10 are one psalm in the Greek and Latin translations, so that the numbers of the actual psalms are different up until Psalm 147 (when there is an opposite division). Modern books also occasionally refer to this double system.

One other point about the psalm headings is that they need to be distinguished from the introductions to psalms in some translations of the Bible that comprise phrases such as “A call to worship.” These introductions are not part of the biblical text but are added by the translators or publishers.

## Ancient and Cultural Context

The temple and its worship often feature in the psalms, which suggests an important context in which they were used in the life of Israel. The temple choirs would sing the psalms of praise at the annual festivals. They would sing prayer psalms on occasions of fasting and prayer, in times of drought, famine, epidemic, or defeat in battle. They would sing thanksgiving psalms when God had delivered his people from disasters and threats of this kind. They would sing psalms on regular occasions such as Sabbath worship.

While some psalms where someone speaks as an individual look as if they were composed for the king, others refer to ordinary human needs, and they may have been composed for ordinary individuals to use. Someone who was ill or whose baby was ill or who was being accused of some wrongdoing might come to the temple to offer a personal sacrifice and pray for God to grant healing or vindication. People who were familiar with such psalms and were not able to come to the temple might pray them on their own, wherever they lived. Some psalms make clear that they were composed for people who could not get to the temple. Some could have been written in exile in a place such as Babylon (Psalm 137 is the most specific example). These psalms were evidently then eventually brought to Jerusalem and put into the Jerusalem psalm collection. Conversely, psalms that started off life as songs and prayers for use in the temple likely also became part of ordinary people’s spirituality, and may have been adapted to that end.

## An Outline of the Book of Psalms

Psalms 1 – 2 and 150 frame the book of Psalms. Psalms 1 and 2 open the book with exhortation and promise. Psalm 150 then concludes the book with an enthusiastic act of praise that responds to everything that has preceded. Within that frame, the Psalms divide into five books.

Book One Psalms 1 – 41

Book Two Psalms 42 – 72

Book Three Psalms 73 – 89

Book Four Psalms 90 – 106

Book Five Psalms 107 – 150

Blessings of God at the end of Psalms 41, 72, 89, and 106 mark the ending of one book and the beginning of the next. These blessings are not part of the psalm they immediately follow; they constitute an “Amen” to all the psalms that precede. Indeed, each blessing contains an “Amen,” which means, “That’s true, I affirm that.”

The division into five books is only formal; the five books do not have themes that distinguish one book from another. Although sometimes an individual psalm will link with the one next to it, the division into books is mostly random. The fivefold division does parallel that of the Pentateuch, which also comprises five books. Both are works of Torah, of teaching or instruction about who God is, who his people are, and how they relate to God.

Behind the division into five books it is possible to see earlier collections of psalms. Interwoven with the introductions to individual psalms as “a psalm of David,” for instance, are introductions such as “psalm of Asaph” or “psalm of the Korahites.” These were the names of worship leaders and musical groups, and the titles will refer to their collections of psalms. The Psalter as a whole resulted in large part from combining these different collections. We do not know when they were merged to form the book of Psalms as we have it, though the process of growth was likely gradual and continued in detailed ways into the latter part of the Second Temple period. One indication is the fact that the Greek translation of the Psalter and the Qumran Scrolls include extra psalms in their Psalters.

The poetic form of the Psalms makes them easier to sing and to remember. In addition, poetry can be compact, dense, and more focused than ordinary speech. Hebrew poetry is not built around rhyme, like most English poetry. A main feature of the poetry of the Psalms is that the lines usually come in pairs, with the second line restating the first, contrasting with it, taking it further, or just completing it. This feature of the lines is called parallelism. There is also a rhythm about the lines, with fairly consistent numbers of stresses in each line, though this feature is hard to see when reading the psalms in translation. The poetry of the Psalms works like modern Rap—there can be varying numbers of syllables and words, but the rhythm keeps the lines going at a steady beat.

As poetry, the Psalms are full of imagery and metaphor, which can make the contents more profound; they make it possible to say more than can be said in ordinary words. In the Psalms, God is a shepherd, a king, a defender, an advocate, a warrior, a teacher, a farmer, a guide, a rock, a shield, a hiding place. His people are his flock, his children, his servants, his school. Their attackers are bulls, lions, trappers, plotters, persecutors, monsters. The imagery in the psalms often involves hyperbole or exaggeration (“I flood my bed with tears”). The use of imagery is another factor that means psalms tell us little about who wrote them or about the concrete and literal situation of their authors. On the other hand, people who use the psalms may be in different situations from the psalms’ authors, but their use of imagery can help people identify with the psalm in the metaphorical way it describes situations of need.

Ancient Babylonian and Egyptian hymns were also poetic, and they can be compared with Israelite psalms. Some manifest parallelism, make similar pleas, and use similar imagery. Conversely, some psalms may adapt ancient Near Eastern hymns; Psalms 29 and 104 are possible examples. The imagery of the Psalms is also more broadly parallel to the imagery of other ancient Near Eastern writings. The Psalms themselves imply that the big difference, is that they are calling on the real God, the God who brought his people out of servitude in Egypt. He is the God whose ears, eyes, mouth, nose, hands, and feet work—he can listen, see, smell, walk, and so on. The gods to whom other peoples pray cannot.

## Distinctive Features

The Old Testament as a whole mostly tells the story of what God did for his people and for the world, or speaks in God’s name to his people about who he is and what he expects of them. The Psalter makes the same assumptions about God and about people as the rest of the Old Testament, but its focus on worship and prayer makes the balance of its assumptions different. It speaks more about creation, less about rules for life, and it focuses more on God’s involvement in people’s everyday lives—their corporate life and their life as individuals. The protest psalms are then examples of things that people can or should say to God; the praise psalms give people words to inspire them in worship. If people worry about how outspoken they can be to God or whether pressing God to act makes a difference, then the psalms of prayer give them encouragement about these questions. If people are not sharing with each other their testimony to what God has done for them, then the psalms of testimony remind them to do so, and give examples of what telling one’s story looks like.

## The Psalms and a Life of Faithfulness

The Psalter starts with a description of the faithful person and the faithless person, the righteous person and the wicked person (Ps. 1), and from time to time the Psalms remind people that they cannot come to worship with enthusiasm or pray with urgency unless they are people who are in good relationships with their neighbors, behave honorably to the needy, and serve the true God and do not pray to other gods (e.g., Pss. 15; 24). On the other hand, the Psalms spend little time acknowledging wrongdoing and confessing sins. They make the assumption that the people praying the Psalms are faithful people, not great sinners, and that they worship and pray as people who can claim to be committed to God and to God’s ways (e.g., Pss. 44; 139). If people who are engaged in praise and prayer cannot make that claim, they need first to sort that out, and only then they can come and worship or pray.

## The Psalms and Kingship

In most psalms, people speak to God. In Psalm 2, however, God himself speaks. He derides nations that attack him and his anointed king, and promises that he will vindicate his anointed. God’s relationship with the king is of key importance to his people and it is therefore a prominent motif in the Psalter. People pray for God to protect the anointed king and deliver him when he is under attack (for instance, when he leads the army in battle). Accounts of coronations in the Old Testament would be occasions for which royal psalms were written and when they were used. A royal wedding would be an occasion for composing and using Psalm 45.

The word for anointed is *meshiah*, messiah. In the Old Testament, the word *meshiah* always refers to a current king (or priest), not to someone that God will send in the future. Even during the time when Israel had kings, prophets already promised that one day there would be a king who would embody the true ideal of kingship. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587, there were no Davidic kings, so the Old Testament then speaks more explicitly of God sending a new David in the future, though they still do not refer to him as the *meshiah*. Yet Israelites continued to use the psalms about the king during those many centuries when they had no king, so that in effect these psalms became messianic: they came to express what God would do one day, not what was true now.

There is another way in which the Psalter suggests that people could continue to use these psalms, when they no longer had kings. Some psalms have especially long introductions that make links with specific moments in David’s life (e.g., Ps. 51). Many of these introductions refer to David not in his kingly role but in connection with situations in ordinary life. Comparing the introductions with the events in David’s life to which they refer reveals that they don’t correspond in a way that suggests they were composed in that situation or with that situation in mind. These headings may, then, be the product of reflection by theologian-scribes seeking to make the psalms more useful to ordinary people, especially in a context when there were no longer kings who were the main people to use these psalms in temple worship. Reading the psalm and the relevant episode in David’s story alongside each other can help people imagine the psalm being used and help them picture how a person might pray in a situation like the one that the story describes. The introductions encourage people to think of David as an ordinary person like them, with strengths, weaknesses, problems, and experiences of God’s deliverance such as they may have.

## The Psalms and Protest

Many psalms are expressions of a cry to God in protest and prayer. These psalms presuppose the need for people to be able to come to God when events threaten them and hurt them. Protest and prayer are especially prominent in the first half of the book of Psalms.

In these psalms a person may do various things.

* Call on God by name.
* Describe a need or the toughness of a situation. The psalm may speak of “them,” of “me” or “us,” and of “you”: that is, it may include reference to what other people are doing to the petitioner, how the petitioner feels and how it affects them, and the ways God abandoned them.
* Recall the way God has been good in the past, with which the present is therefore such a contrast.
* Affirm nevertheless a trust in God.
* Declare that the person praying is fundamentally committed to God’s ways, so that there is no reason for God to be sending punishment.
* Ask for God to turn, listen, and deliver. The actual prayer in these psalms is thus usually general rather than concrete.
* Thank God for listening to the prayer and for responding, even though the petitioner has not yet seen the answer itself.
* Look forward to coming back to testify to God’s faithfulness and bring an offering when the petitioner has experienced the answer.

In these psalms, people are free to be bold and confrontational in their relationship with God, like children in relation to a father. They know that they can say anything to God, as children can to their father. They can pray the most violent prayers, leaving it to God to decide what to do with these prayers. Praying violent prayers takes the place of taking violent action. People can also pray those violent prayers on behalf of friends or family who are victims of violence, when the people praying are unable to come to the aid of the victims or to take action against the wrongdoers. From Daniel and Maccabees we know about Antiochus Epiphanes’ persecution of people in Jerusalem in the 160s BCE; it would be the kind of context in which people wrote and used protest psalms.

## The Psalms and Trust

Within the range of psalms that address God in situations of need, while some are characterized by urgent pleading, others are characterized by confidence and poise. Thus it is possible to distinguish between psalms of protest and psalms that express a more prayerful trust: in Psalm 23 the speaker confidently states that “the Lord is my shepherd.” Instead of protesting to God In a situation of anger and need, a psalm may express a commitment to trusting in God (e.g., Ps. 11). For the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the end of the eighth century, the overlap between the city’s deliverance from Sennacherib as Isaiah speaks of it and the declarations of trust in Psalms 46 and 48 suggests either that such psalms were used on this occasion or that this occasion inspired them.

One cannot divide psalms neatly into examples of the two types; they belong on a spectrum running from despair to assurance. The difference may reflect how urgent or dangerous the background situation, or how anxious or traumatized the person is; there are psalms in the Psalter for people in any state.

Further, among the psalms of trust (and other types of psalm), there are “we” psalms and “I” psalms, which implies that there are psalms for the community to pray and psalms for the individual to pray. Yet we again cannot simply divide psalms into two types on this basis. Psalms can switch between “we” and “I.” So an “I” psalm might be a congregational psalm. Conversely, psalms can be used in ways that differ from the context for which they were written. Individuals might use a “we” psalm when on their own. Either way, groups and individuals in ancient Israel would have used these psalms as expressions of trust in God in everyday situations, as well as in the midst of crises. The presence of such psalms in the Psalter draws attention to the way in which the Psalter could function as a manual of spirituality for people.

## The Psalms and Praise

Songs of praise classically do two things. First, they invite or urge people to come into God’s presence, to chant loudly, to bow before him, to praise his name, and to proclaim who he is. Their exhortations to acknowledge the God of Israel as the God of the entire world would gain new significance when Israel was under the domination of the great imperial powers, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persia, and the Seleucids.

Second, the songs of praise provide the reasons why people should acknowledge God. The Hebrew word translated “because” often explicitly links the exhortation with the reasons in these psalms. They describe God as good, committed, faithful, merciful, honorable, majestic, and sovereign. Psalms with these features cluster in Psalms 95 – 100. Like psalms of protest and psalms of trust, psalms of praise can express a particular understanding of God. God is the one who created the world; these psalms express a sense of amazement at the wonder of the created world. God is also the shepherd of his people, the one who has been involved in Israel’s story, the one who rescued his people from servitude in Egypt. The Lord simply is God, whereas other so-called gods are not.

The Torah lays down expectations concerning occasions in the year when Israelites gathered for a worship festival. The biggest of these occasions was Sukkot or Tabernacles, the harvest celebration in September/October that marked the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year. It was also an occasion when people thought back to God’s deliverance of their ancestors from servitude in Egypt; they lived in *sukkot* (shelters) to reenact the way their ancestors had lived at that time. Some psalms of praise would likely be used at such festivals.

## The Psalms and Thanksgiving

Psalms can also bring thanks to God for particular things he has done for individuals, for the king, or for the people as a whole. These are not the acts from long ago like the exodus but the actions God has taken in people’s lives now. For the community as whole, an occasion such as the restoration of the temple after its destruction in 587 or the subsequent consecration of the rebuilt wall of Jerusalem would be such an occasion. For ordinary people, thanksgiving psalms would have a natural place in connection with the offering of thanksgiving sacrifices. When people come to make such an offering, they could use these psalms to expresses gratitude to God for what he has done. Individuals might come with family and friends and offer sacrifices that the worshiper shared with God and with these other people in the form of a meal.

The psalms that people then used were both thanksgiving and testimony. As acts of thanksgiving, they address God as “you.” But they mix address to God with address to other people, because the psalm is also a testimony. It told a story, about an act of God in one’s life. Once again, the nature of the psalm was to affirm aspects of the truth about God. He is one who involves himself in practical ways in his people’s lives to deliver them from dangers and disasters. As a testimony, such a psalm invites other people to recognize this fact and to grow in trust in God.

In these psalms. people may review

* How things were before disaster happened
* How things went wrong
* How they prayed
* How God acted in response
* How the petitioners invite other people to join in the praise

There can be overlap between thanksgiving psalms and protest psalms, in that a protest psalms may end by thanking God for responding to the prayer. But in a protest psalm, the response is to something that the person has heard or felt; in a thanksgiving psalm, the person has now actually seen the response.

Thanksgiving psalms often praise God for a rescue from death, which means a rescue from death as a threat. Regardless of type, the Psalms focus on this life. They accept that life after death means simply life in the grave, life in Sheol, the abode of the dead. Sheol is not a place of punishment any more than a place of bliss. It is simply a place where people continue existing in a lifeless way. By late Second Temple times, many Jews had come to believe that there will be resurrection life. But the Psalms work with no such expectation. The lack of this expectation adds further passion to the praise and prayer in the book of Psalms. Now is the time when God needs to answer prayers so that people may live a full and long life now. The time to praise God is now.