## The Book of Psalms

## Introduction

The Book of Psalms, “The Psalter,” is a collection of 150 songs of praise and prayers (along with some exhortations and promises) written in Hebrew in Israel over nearly a thousand years, during the centuries up to the common era. They express their praise and prayer in a variety of connections:

* Many praise God for how great and caring he is, and for what he has done for his people (e.g., Psalm 98: “Sing to Yahweh a new song, because he has worked wonders”). The psalms are thus a significant source for understanding the theology of the Scriptures.
* Some give testimony to particular things God has done for the community or for individuals (e.g., Psalm 30: “I will extol you, Yahweh, because you have lifted me up, and not let my enemies rejoice over me”)
* The biggest group, however, protest the way things are going wrong in the life of the community or of individuals, and urge God to deliver his people and put down their adversaries (e.g., Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”)
* Another group declare their trust in God (e.g., Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd”). They are among the psalms that emphasize God’s being a refuge and being one who protects from enemies.
* A few focus on confessing wrongdoing (e.g. Psalm 51: “Be gracious to me, God,… blot out my rebellions”)
* Some are not expressions of praise or prayer but blessings, didactic pieces offering insight about life, challenges to right living, promises about the king, or exhortations to the king.

The Psalter does not organize the different types of psalm into groups, and the order in which they follow one another can look random, though it sometimes shows signs of deliberate ordering. In particular, the Psalter begins (Psalm 1) with a significant exclamation, “The blessings of the person who has not walked by the advice of faithless people… but rather their delight is in Yahweh’s instruction,” and then goes on (Psalm 2) with a promise for the king. And it ends with five Hallelujah psalms, psalms simply praising God. Further, as a whole, the Psalter is divided into five books that parallel the five books of Torah and remind people to follow the examples and instructions that the Psalter is full of.

Whereas it is common to refer to the Scriptures as the Word of God, a distinctive characteristic of the Psalms is their being mainly words addressed to God. Their inclusion in the Scriptures suggests the assumption that they are things that it is proper to say to God. They are praises and prayers that God is willing to accept.

A number of stories in the Scriptures, especially in the Books of Chronicles, provide examples of psalms being used in the worship, like a hymnbook. And like some hymnbooks, the Psalter is itself in effect a collection of hymnbooks, strung together. The headings to the psalms point to its thus combining a number of earlier collections of psalms, such as Asaph Psalms, Korah Psalms, and David Psalms. These headings do not record the names of the individuals who wrote the psalms, but indicate the group to which the composers, within the people responsible for temple worship. In this connection, David was especially important as the person who had the vision for the building of the temple and its worship. Thirteen psalms have headings that make a more specific connection with David’s life, encouraging people to imagine him praying the psalms.

Other stories in the Scriptures illustrate individuals praying in the way the Psalms do in contexts other than the temple. Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 is one example; Jonah is another. In connection with personal use of the Psalms, an implication of their not including the composer’s name is that people did not need this information in order to use their words in praise or prayer. Likewise, the psalms give little indication of the literal reasons why people are praying or giving thanks. Their rather using picture language makes it more possible for people to use them in many circumstances.

The Psalms continue to be used in the worship and spiritual life of the Jewish community. They are often quoted in the New Testament, and they are used in Christian worship. The Quran (17:55) also comments that God gave David the Psalms, and encourages people to praise God and pray in similar terns to ones that the Psalms use. Through the centuries before printed books existed, Jewish scholars called the Masoretes (the “traditioners”) copied out the Psalms, as they did the other Scriptures. The process of copying reached a climax in about 1000 AD in the laying down of the definitive “Masoretic Text,” which became the basis for printed versions of the Psalms and thus for the translation in the King James Version.

One might then have wondered if the text became altered over the centuries, but the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the mid-twentieth century, included parts of the Psalter, and these manuscripts indicated that this had not happened. The text of the Psalms in 1000 AD was more or less the same as that in the Dead Sea Scrolls from a thousand years earlier. More modern translations such as the New Revised Standard Version do occasionally change the Masoretic Text of the Psalms as of other books, in light of concluding that a change did take place (e.g., Psalm 11:1 says in the Masoretic Text, “Flee to your mountain, bird,” but NRSV has “Flee like a bird to the mountains”).

The Psalms are written in verse, though the verse is not as regular as that of hymns, and it does not rhyme like hymns, though lines commonly rhyme in thought:

Praise Yahweh, all nations.

extol him, all peoples. (Psalm 117)

People who cannot read Hebrew may thus be able to see how the lines rhyme. They may also be able to see that there is a rhythm about psalms. It is again not a precise rhythm like an English hymn, but it would make it possible to chant psalms. Singing psalms would thus be like doing rap. The number of words in the lines can vary as long as one keeps the rhythm going.

The poetic nature of the psalms compares with works from Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Egypt. To some extent, the theology also compares. These neighboring peoples also looked to their gods as creators, took them to be sovereign in the world, and assumed that they were loving and just. But Israelite psalms reflect the conviction that there is only one God, who was especially committed to Israel, and his acts in Israel’s life (especially in bringing Israel out of Egypt) were of importance to their praise and prayer, and they often use the name God gave to Israel, the name “Yahweh” (English translations usually change that name to “the LORD”, thus in capitals).

The Psalms speak much about the importance of the king and Yahweh’s commitment to him, which is no longer of direct significance in the Second Temple period when Israel has no kings. They also express longing for and confidence about God’s acting to bring about righteousness in the world and to put down wrong, which also do not find fulfilment. Thus both these features of the Psalms became the subject of hope, for a messianic king and for a future fulfilment of God’s purpose. These become hopes connected with the Psalms in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the New Testament, which sees Jesus as the messianic king. Psalms 2 and 22 are especially significant in this connection.

The Dead Sea Scrolls psalms include a few that are not in the “official” Psalter, and outside the Psalter there is a group of eighteen psalms from the same period called “Psalms of Solomon” (they did not come from Solomon).

Like the rest of the Scriptures, in the Second Temple period the Psalms were also translated into Greek, the international language of the time, becoming part of the Septuagint, and also into Aramaic, becoming part of the Targum. The word “psalms” is a Greek word; the equivalent Hebrew words are *mizmor*, which means a music piece,and *tehillim*, ”praises.” The Greek version was translated into Syriac, and also into Latin as Latin became the international language. The early church theologian Jerome made a new translation into Latin from the Hebrew, the Vulgate, which was in due course translated into English. The King James Version in turn was a fresh translation from the Hebrew, though it often followed the interpretation of Septuagint or the Vulgate.

Whereas in Judaism the Torah is the part of the Hebrew Scriptures that carries most weight, in the Christian church the Psalter has had that place. Many people possess a copy of the New Testament bound only with the Psalter, which has often been the chief source of praise in worship; few Christian hymns were written until recent centuries. The Psalms have had a profound influence on individual Christians’ relationship with God, though ironically the boldness of their protests to God about their suffering and their desire for God to put down their adversaries is a feature that Christians have been more hesitant to follow.

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## Critical Trends in the Study of the Psalms

In the early twentieth century, the main critical trends in the study of the Psalms were associated with identifying and analyzing different types or genres of psalm (“form criticism”). Hermann Gunkel is the key name here. In the mid-twentieth century, an additional focus was a quest to identify the nature of the worship that formed the background of the use of the psalms, and in particular the place of the king, which made it possible to discover from the Psalms aspects of Israel’s worship and to discover from consideration of Israel’s worship aspects of the Psalms themselves. An important feature was consideration of Israel’s worship against the background of Mesopotamian worship. Sigmund Mowinckel is the key name here.

Later in the twentieth century, scholarly attention returned to consider the nature of the Psalter itself, the process whereby it came into being within the faith of Israel, and the way it was structured or organized. In connection with this “canonical criticism”), Brevard S. Childs is the key name. Towards the end of the twentieth century, scholarly attention also turned to the personal and social dynamics of the faith expressed in the Psalms, particularly the “lament psalms” and the way they cry out to God. The key name here is Walter Brueggemann.

Trends in biblical criticism commonly follow trends in criticism in other areas of the humanities, and this has been so in more recent decades. These trends include

* Feminist and gender study: looking for indications of the presence of women’s insights or involvement in the Psalms, or the lack of it.
* Intertextuality: looking for indications of overlap and mutual influence between psalms and with other works within the Hebrew Scriptures and elsewhere.
* Reception History: studying how the Psalms have been interpreted and been influential over the centuries.
* Postcolonial study: examining ways in which the Psalms imply questions about political power and resistance to power.
* Trauma: asking how the Psalms reflect trauma and seek to deal with it, and how understanding trauma helps an understanding of the Psalms.

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