



MTA - OLD TESTAMENT PSALMS AND BIBLICAL POETRY

Introduction

- Psalms contains well-known and most-loved passages of Scripture.
- Psalms feature a huge range of expression.
- The book of Psalms is the longest book of the Bible (that is, in number of chapters; in number of words, it's Jeremiah).

Why study psalms?

1. The psalms talk about Jesus!

- He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the *Psalms*." - Luke 24:44-47
- Why study psalms?

2. Psalms were valued by the early church

- "Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." (Eph 5:18b-19a)
- "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." (Col 3:16)
- "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." (Jam 5:13)
- See comments from church leaders: Athanasius, Luther, Calvin

1. TITLE

- Hebrew: *Sepher Tehillim* = Book of Praises
- Greek (Septuagint): *Psalmoi* = "Psalms"
- Latin: *Liber Psalmorum* = "Book of Psalms"

2. AUTHORSHIP

Most psalms have titles or superscriptions.

- Data from psalm titles: (1) author, (2) name of collection, (3) type of psalm, (4) musical notations, (5) liturgical notations and (6) brief indications of occasion for composition.
- At least 7 authors from headings

Psalm Authors and their Works

Authors	Number of psalms	Psalms attributed according to titles
David	73	Psalms 3-9; 11-32; 34-41; 51-65; 68-70; 86; 101; 103; 108-110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138-145
Asaph	12	Psalms 50; 73-83
Sons of Korah	11	Psalms 42; 44-49; 84-85; 87-88
Solomon	2	Psalms 72; 127
Moses	1	Psalm 90
Heman	1	Psalm 88 (shared)
Ethan	1	Psalm 89
No author notated	50	

- In the original Hebrew, the attribution of authorship is done using a simple preposition, which is one letter (lamed).
- It is not surprising that David is considered the main author of Psalms. The historical books of the Bible speak of David's considerable accomplishments as a musician, singer and composer.

3. DATE & SETTING

- ANET (Ancient Near Eastern Texts): Religious poetry was not unique to the ancient Israelites.
- The psalms were composed over a span of about one thousand years. The earliest was by Moses (Psalm 90) in the fifteenth century B.C., and a couple appear to be contemporary with the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C. (Psalms 126 and 137).
- The psalms are generally associated with what is called the United Kingdom Period of Israel (about 1100-950 BC).
- Most psalms are associated with the *Temple cult* (organized worship or religious expression) in Jerusalem during the time of Solomon.

4. GENRE/LITERARY STYLE

- Psalms are *lyric poems*.
- We get “psalm” from the Greek word *psalmos*, which means “poem or song sung to stringed accompaniment.”
- The related Hebrew word is "zmr" meaning "to pluck"; i.e., taking hold of the strings of an instrument.

5. GUIDING CONCEPTS

Numbering the Psalms

- The two main texts for Psalms: Masoretic Text, MT (Hebrew) and the Septuagint, LXX (Greek). The MT and LXX number the psalms differently.
- In its final edition in the Hebrew Text (MT), the Psalter contains 150 psalms.

Organization of Psalms

- Psalms is five books (collections) in one.
- This no doubt is a Jewish-style organization (like the Pentateuch).

The Arrangement of the Book of Psalms

Book/section	Number of psalms	Has parallel themes in	Authorial attribution	Ending benediction
Book 1	41	Genesis	David – 37, Unknown – 4	41:13
Book 2	31	Exodus	David – 18, Korahites – 7, Asaph – 1, Solomon -1, Unknown – 4	72:19-20
Book 3	17	Leviticus	Asaph – 11, David -1, Korahites – 3, Heman – 1, Ethan -1	89:52
Book 4	17	Numbers	Moses – 1, David – 2, Unknown – 14	106:48
Book 5	44	Deuteronomy	David – 15, Solomon – 1, Unknown – 28	150 (whole psalm)

Hebrew Poetry

- The Hebrews responded to events with lyric poetry.
- As much as 75% of the Old Testament may be seen as poetry.
- Psalms were recorded as early as the times of the Exodus (Ex 15:1-18, 21) and the judges (Jud 5:2-31).

Early Psalms and Poetic Fragments

The Song of the Sea	Exodus 15:1-18
The Song of the Ark	Numbers 10:35-36
The Oracles of Balaam	Numbers 23-24
The Song of Moses	Deuteronomy 32
The Blessing of Moses	Deuteronomy 33
The Song of Deborah	Judges 5
The Song of Hannah	1 Samuel 2:1-10

- Building Block: The basic building block for Hebrew poetry is the *line*, which is composed of short sentences used in parallel. The short sentence is called a *colon* (plural *cola*).

Meter in Poetry

- Meter and rhythm in poetry have to do with patterns and recurrences in sound.
- This is best understood by considering the accents in the Hebrew, which may also be heard to some degree in translation.

Parallelism

- One of the most obvious poetic features of the psalms is their use of parallelism (balanced or echoed segments called *cola*).
"The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands." (Ps 19:1).
- The psalmist is not trying to say that the heavens do one thing and the skies another. Instead, he is using parallelism to reinforce the idea.
- Kinds of parallelism

SYNONYMOUS (19:1-2)

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

ANTITHETIC (73:26)

My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

SYNTHETIC (2:6)

I have installed my king on Zion
my holy hill.

Imagery

- The psalmists invite the reader to see with the mind's eye, creating word pictures to convey emotions and convictions.
- Some prime examples of the use of imagery are found in Psalms 1, 18, 19, 23, and 104.
- Leland Ryken points out, "Poetry is above all a very special use of language...Poetry is the language of images." He adds, "Readers of poetry need to think in images, just as poets do."

Figurative Language

- Poetic passages contain a high percentage of figurative language (much more than in prose or narrative). By definition, a *figure of speech* occurs when a word or phrase is used in a sense other than the usual or literal sense.

Anthropomorphism: Giving human characteristics to God.

Psalm 130:2 O Lord, hear my voice. Let your *ears* be attentive to my cry.

Zoomorphism: Giving animal characteristics to non-animals.

Psalm 63:7 I sing in the shadow of Your *wings*.

Merism: Using two extremes or opposites to represent everything in between.

Psalm 139:2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up (=all his activity).

6. THE TYPES OF PSALMS

- Modern music is heard in a variety of genres. People listen to and combine different types.
- Purpose and form (see 1 Chronicles 16:1-4):

Three Major Types of Psalms (based on 1 Chronicles 16:4)

Lament or Petition Psalms	NIV: to make petition	ESV: to invoke
Thanksgiving or Acknowledgement Psalms	NIV: to give thanks	ESV: to thank
Praise Psalms or Hymns	NIV: to praise	ESV: to praise

- Praise Songs or Hymns – composed for times when all is well; for those trouble-free times in life.
- Laments – composed for times of disorientation, when we are overwhelmed with anger, fear, or despair.
- Thanksgiving Psalms – composed for times of looking back at the past troublesome days, to express joy and gratitude to God for deliverance.

Most common are laments

- In lament or complaint psalms we hear the strong, emotional words of individual sufferers or communities. These are words written by real people in very difficult situations.
- Laments “give voice to the complaint saints feel when they experience various troubles in this life” (McGinniss).

The Minor Types

- Festival Songs and Liturgical Psalms - psalms which lay emphasis on public festivities or liturgical action; associated with special events such as the Sabbath or Dedication of the Temple
- Royal psalms – psalms which highlight royalty. This designation covers two types. In royal psalms for the current monarch, the subject matter is the *incumbent king*. Other royal psalms are called enthronement psalms.
- Wisdom psalms – psalms that teach. By their form and content these psalms share the characteristics of Old Testament wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes). They are also called didactic psalms (didactic=meant for instruction).
- Messianic psalm - a psalm which predicts or depicts the coming of the messiah in the person of Jesus Christ.
- Psalms of penitence (or prayer songs of the sinner) - psalms which reflect the sinfulness of man, typically articulating guilt and remorse.
- Acrostic poems - psalms so written that the initial letters of consecutive lines form an alphabet, word, or phrase (for easier memorization); just as with a sermon acrostic.

7. THEMES

- Worship and prayer
- Reflections on God
- Happiness

- Wisdom (Choices)
- Justice

God of the Psalmists

- At the core of the theology of the Psalter is the conviction that the gravitational center of life, history and of the whole creation (heaven and earth), is *God*.

Happiness

- Happiness is a universal human pursuit.
- The psalms may be viewed as instruction (*torah* in Psalm 1) for *happiness*. The first word in Psalms (*ashrey*) occurs 28x in the Book of Psalms.
- *Ashrey* has traditionally been translated “blessed” (KJV, NKJV, NIV, ESV). Others use the word “happy” (TNK, NRSV, NAB). But happiness in biblical usage means much more than an emotion.

Choices

- Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the concept of choices (contrasting decisions and contrasting destinies).
- Choices relate to wisdom. In the Bible, wisdom is really an approach to life.

Biblical Wisdom

- Wisdom is concerned with everyday life, how to live well.
- Wisdom refers to “life skills.”
- The perspectives of wisdom are not unique to Israelites, although in Israelite wisdom commitment to God is simply assumed (cf. Prov 1:7).
Psalm 1: Your choices determine your destiny.
Psalm 2: The better choice is to serve God.
You must make your choice!

Jesus in the Psalms

- The psalms carry a longing for something (*someone!*) greater who will fulfill all of Israel’s needs and dreams.
- In the OT, Jesus is the predicted Messiah. The Hebrew word *mashiach*, from which we derive “messiah,” means “anointed one.”
- The psalm authors point to Jesus. They are mainly of two kinds: priests and kings. Asaph, Heman, and Korah were from priestly clans. David and Solomon were kings.
- This points to the two offices which are uniquely combined in Jesus, who is both priest and king (Hebrews 1:8-9; 5:6).

Aspects of Jesus’ Nature, Character, and Role

Psalm Passage	Detail of Jesus’ Life	New Testament Reference
45:6	Deity and Kingship	Hebrews 1:8
2:7	The Son of God	Matthew 3:17
110:1	Rules over His enemies	Matthew 22:44
40:7-8	Delights in God’s will	Hebrews 10:7
8:6	Ruler of all	Hebrews 2:8
69:9	Zealous for God’s house	John 2:17
110:4	A priest forever	Hebrews 5:6
118:22	The chief stone of God’s building	Matthew 21:42
118:26	Comes in the name of the Lord	Matthew 21:9

- The psalms look forward to the coming of the Messiah who would ultimately fulfill Yahweh's sovereign rule. To study this out further, I recommend a sequential study of these psalms: 2, 16, 22, 40, 45, 72, 110.
- Psalm 118 is an example of a psalm used by a New Testament writer to prove that Jesus is the coming Messiah.

8.0 STUDYING INDIVIDUAL PSALMS

- Analogy: studying a psalm is like appreciating a painting.
- There are three steps and accompanying guide questions for working through the text.

Step 1. Get oriented

- Q. What type/category of psalm is it?
- Q. If the psalm has a title, what can I learn from it?
- Q. Does this psalm have links to the ones before or after it?

Step 2. Get into the poetry

- Q. What are the form and flow of the text?
- Q. What images are used? Any figures of speech?

Step 3. Get the message

- Q. What big theme is touched upon in this psalm?
- Q. What might be the author's situation and feelings in this psalm?
- Q. How would this psalm apply to me?

Conclusion

- God has blessed us with a biblical prayer book and songbook, the Book of Psalms.
- The power and brilliance of the psalms underscore the greatness of God, who moved the psalmists to pen these masterpieces!

For Further Reading

On Hebrew Poetry and Wisdom Literature

- Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.
- Murphy, Roland E. *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997; New York: Doubleday, 1990.
- Petersen, David L. and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.
- Von Rad, Gerhard. *Wisdom in Israel*. London: SCM, 1970.

On the Psalms

- Allen, Leslie C. *Psalms 101-150*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, TX: Word, 2002.
- Broyles, Craig C. *Psalms*. New International Biblical Commentary. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Spirituality of the Psalms*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.
- Craigie, Peter C. *Psalms 1-50*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, TX: Word, 1983.
- Lewis, C.S. *Reflections on the Psalms*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1958.
- McCann, J. Clinton. *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993.