

# A LOOK AT A BOOK: PSALMS

## January 12, 2014

### Getting Started

Psalms is the most read, the most used, of all the Old Testament books. The Psalms express every emotion – from joy to despair, from hate to love.

Remember the Twenty-third Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...” Or Psalm 100: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!” (vv. 1,2). Or Psalm 119:105: “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

The book also forms a kind of summary of Old Testament theology, reflecting representative themes in the story of God and ancient Israel. In addition, the Psalms have influenced the worship of the church.

Let’s look at three introductory matters.

### The Setting of the Psalter

Crucial to our study of the Psalms is a framework, and the setting in which Old Testament psalms occur can supply it. The book of Psalms reflects the practice of the people journeying, going on a pilgrimage to worship in Jerusalem. We will see that there is a collection of psalms for the ascent to the temple. Note Psalm 122:1: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” We might also think of pilgrimage in a broader sense, as a metaphor for the life of faith. Believers, ancient and modern, journey through life. The songs help articulate, encourage, and define believe in Yahweh. They help ancient Israel comprehend its distinctive faith.

### The Shape of the Psalter

**Title.** The word “psalm” is a transliteration of the Greek word referring to a song performed to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. However, the original title of the book is “Book of Praises.”

**Structure.** The Psalter consists of five divisions, or “books,” analogous to the first five books of the Old Testament, the book of Moses.

Book 1	Psalms 1-41
Book II	Psalms 42-72

Book III	Psalms 73-89
Book IV	Psalms 90-106
Book V	Psalms 107-150

**Superscriptions.** Of the 150 psalms, 116 have superscriptions, brief titles written just above the text. Most scholars agree that superscriptions are not original to the text but were added in the process of compiling the Psalter. The superscriptions vary but often contain three elements:

1. *Liturgical collections.* “Psalm of David,” “Psalm of Asaph,” or “Psalm of the Sons of Korah,” indicating the liturgical collection from which the psalm came.

2. *Technical terms related to use in worship.* Psalm 59 is a Miktam (golden poem) of David, and its superscription includes instructions to the choirmaster. The phrase “according to Do Not Destroy” apparently refers to the tune used to accompany the psalm.

3. *Historical notes.* The superscription of Psalm 59 says, “A Miktam of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.” These historical notes help the reader envision the psalm’s impact in a particular setting in a representative person’s life.

Psalm 57’s superscription has all three elements: “To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy [technical terms for use in worship.] A Miktam of David [liturgical collection], when he fled from Saul, in the cave [historical note].”

**Collections.** Collections in the Psalter are:

Davidic Collections	Psalms 3-41; 51-72; 138-145
Korahite Collections	Psalms 42-49; 84-85; 87-88
Elohistic Collection	Psalms 42-83
Asaphite Collection	Psalms 73-83
Psalms on the Kingship of God	Psalms 93-100
A Collection of Psalms of Praise	Psalms 103-107
Songs of Ascents	Psalms 120-134
(perhaps on ascent, pilgrimage, to the temple for worship)	
Hallelujah Psalms	Psalms 111-118; 146-150
(beginning/ending with “hallelujah” [Praise the Lord])	

The tradition relating David to the Psalms is strong and unmistakable in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 16; 2 Samuel 1; 22; 23; 1 Chronicles 16; 25; Amos 6). Perhaps we should say that David was the patron of the primary sponsor of psalmody in ancient Israel.

The core of the Psalter is the Davidic collections (Psalms 3-41; 51-72; 138-145), texts which are most often cries for help in the midst of crisis and which come from an individual rather than from the whole community. The psalms of the Sons of Korah (Psalms 42-49; 84-85; 87-88) and the psalms of Asaph (Psalms 73-83) include more community psalms.

### **The Poetry of the Psalter**

1. *Synonymous parallelism.* The second line enhances the thought of the first by way of a closely related statement: What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? (Psalm 8:4)
2. *Antithetic parallelism.* The second line may complete a thought by presenting a contrast to the first line: For the wicked shall be cut off; but those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land. (Psalm 37:9)
3. *Stair-step parallelism.* The second line may continue the thought of the first and take it a step further: For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. (Psalm 95:3)

### **A Classification of the Psalms**

#### **I. Praise**

##### **A. General Hymns**

29, 33, 68, 100, 103, 105, 111, 113, 114, 115, 117, 134, 135, 139, 145,  
146, 147, 149, 150

##### **B. Creation Psalms**

8, 19, 65, 104, 148

##### **C. Enthronement Psalms**

47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99

##### **D. Zion Psalms**

46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122

##### **E. Entrance Liturgies**

15, 24

##### **F. Hymns with Prophetic Warnings**

50, 81, 82

##### **G. Trust Psalms**

23, 91, 121, 125, 131

## H. Thanksgiving Psalms

### 1. Individual Psalms

30, 34, 41, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138

### 2. Community Psalms

65, 75, 107, 124, 129, 136

## II. Lament

### A. Individual Psalms

3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9-10, 11, 13, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 42-43, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 94, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, 143

### B. Community Psalms

12, 14, 44, 53, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 106, 108, 123, 126, 137

## III. Royal Psalms

2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144

## IV. Wisdom Psalms

1, 32, 37, 49, 73, 78, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133