

Introduction to the Psalms Tony Hopkins

The book of Psalms is a collection of hymns, poems, prayers, and liturgies. Many of them were written or adapted for use in worship, particularly in the Second Temple.

The book of Psalms is notable in many ways:

- Composed over the longest period of time, from 10th to 4th century BCE
- Largest collection of Hebrew poetry
- Longest book in the Bible (both by volume and by number of chapters; the Hebrew Bible has 150 psalms and the LXX has 151)
- Contains the longest chapter in the Bible (Ps 119, which has 176 verses)
- Most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament

Many of the psalms are ascribed to David, though it should be noted that "a psalm of David" can mean "a psalm written in the style of David." Some psalms are attributed to other writers, including people who are very well known (Moses) and people who are otherwise unknown to us.

The book belongs to the third division of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings. It is arranged in five parts, likely an imitation of the Pentateuch; each section concludes with a doxology, or psalm of praise. (The five sections are 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150.)

The most observable characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, in which one line is paralleled by the next line. There are three main types of parallelism.

1. Synonymous parallelism, in which the second line restates the first:

*I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave. . . . (88:4-5)*

2. Antithetical Parallelism, in which the second line is the converse (antithesis) of the first:

*for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (1:6)*

3. Synthetic parallelism, in which the second line builds on the first:

*But as for me, I walk in my integrity,
redeem me, and be gracious to me. (26:11)*

Types of psalms

On the one hand, putting psalms in categories is quite natural: similarities in content and theme are readily observable. On the other hand, the psalms cannot be neatly categorized or counted because many psalms fall into more one than one category.

- Hymns of praise (at least 24)
- Communal laments (at least 10)
- Personal laments (at least 40; largest group)
 - Imprecatory psalms (69, 109, 137)
- Wisdom psalms (at least 10; "Blessed is/are. . . .")
- Personal songs of thanksgiving (at least 9)
- Royal psalms (at least 9)
- Historical psalms (at least 5)
- Songs of ascent, or pilgrim psalms (120-134)
- Songs for Passover (113-118)

Hymns of Praise (at least 24; second largest group)

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations. (Psalm 100)*

Psalms of Lament (largest group: 40 individual, 10 corporate)

Common features

Call on God/YHWH (the LORD)
Description of present need (sin, illness, injustice, enemies)
Prayer for help/deliverance
Reasons God should help the one praying
Vow to offer praise or sacrifice when petition is granted
Grateful praise to God (often in past tense)

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest. . . .
For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots. . . .
All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.*

(Psalm 22:1-2, 16-18, 27-28)

Psalm of Ascent, or Pilgrim Psalm (Ps 120-134)

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore. (Psalm 122)*

Wisdom Psalms

Common Features

Formula: "Blessed is/are . . ."
Teacher speaking to pupil or son
Proverbs
Themes such as the righteous and wicked
Advice about how to live
Concern with reward and punishment

*Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
Selah
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:1-5)*

("Selah" seems to function emphatically, as in "Stop and Listen"— recall Jesus' refrain, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear." Perhaps it indicated a musical interlude.)

Imprecatory Psalms (pronouncing a curse)

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How could we sing the LORD'S song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Blessed shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
Blessed shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock! (Psalm 137)*

On this side of Jesus, the ending of the psalm seems startling in the brutality of the image; yet two factors mitigate our understanding of the psalm. First, in a time when people didn't believe in an afterlife, appeals for justice were necessarily immediate and urgent. Second, and more importantly, the psalmist cries out to God in pain and anger but then trusts the results to God (that is, he doesn't take it upon himself to act out vengeance).

Finally, the breadth and depth of the Psalms resist easy summary, but we can say a word about the themes of the book, which may be organized into what the psalms say about God (theology) and what they say about human beings (anthropology).

1. YHWH is sovereign. This sovereignty, as described in the Psalms, is seen in creation, in history, and in God's covenant with Israel.
2. God is holy and righteous. God's righteousness is the standard by which all things, including people, are to be measured.
3. God is just. Sometimes, from our perspective, God (or life) may seem unfair, but the goodness of God can be trusted.
4. The steadfast love of God (*chesed*) is faithful—it endures forever; and it is gracious—it offers forgiveness to those who will repent and receive it.
5. God hears and answers prayers.

1. Human beings are the pinnacle of God's creation, whom God has crowned with glory and given dominion over God's creation.
2. Human beings are sinful, and our only hope of overcoming our sin is for God to cleanse us and renew our hearts.
3. Human beings should have a certain orientation to this life, which includes trusting God, worshipping God, and living in obedience and faithfulness.
4. Obedience leads to blessedness, or happiness (Wisdom psalms).