

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

**“BLESS THE LORD, O MY SOUL, AND FORGET NOT ALL HIS
BENEFITS” (103:2)**

BOOK I	BOOK II	BOOK III	BOOK IV	BOOK V
41 psalms	31 psalms	17 psalms	17 psalms	44 psalms
1	41	42	72	73
DOXOLOGY AT THESE VERSES CONCLUDES EACH BOOK				
41:13	72:18-19	89:52	106:48	150:6
JEWISH TRADITION ASCRIBES TOPICAL LIKENESS TO PENTATEUCH				
GENESIS	EXODUS	LEVITICUS	NUMBERS	DEUTERONOMY
—AUTHORS—				
mainly (or all) DAVID	mainly DAVID and KORAH	mainly ASAPH	mainly ANONYMOUS	mainly DAVID
ORIGINAL GROUP BY DAVID	BOOKS II AND III ADDED DURING THE REIGNS OF HEZEKIAH AND JOSIAH		MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTIONS COMPILED IN TIMES OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH	

**POSSIBLE CHRONOLOGICAL STAGES IN THE GROWTH AND COLLECTION
OF THE PSALTER**

The Book of Psalms

I. Book Title

The word psalms comes from the Greek word *psalmoi*. It suggests the idea of a “praise song,” as does the Hebrew word *tehillim*. It is related to a Hebrew concept which means “the plucking of strings.” It means a song to be sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. The Psalms is a collection of worship songs sung to God by the people of Israel with musical accompaniment. The collection of these 150 psalms into one book served as the first hymnbook for God’s people, written and compiled to assist them in their worship of God. At first, because of the wide variety of these songs, this praise book was unnamed, but eventually the ancient Hebrews called it “The Book of Praises,” or simply “Praises.” This title reflects its main purpose—to assist believers in the proper worship of God.

II. Human Authors

Most biblical books were written by one person, but a few of them have multiple authors. Proverbs is one such example. Psalms is one of the rare books in the Bible that was written by several people, and, therefore it is a joint effort of many authors who wrote from many diverse experiences of life over a time span of almost a thousand years. Familiarity with the varied writers of the Psalms is important.

- David, the second king of Israel and “sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1 KJV), is the chief author of the Psalms. He is directly credited with writing 73 of the psalms, but the NT affirms his authorship of 2 more. Thus he wrote 75 of the 150 psalms, which is exactly half the Psalms (3-9; 11-32; 34-41; 51-65; 68-70; 86; 101; 103; 108-110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138-145). Psalm 2 is identified by Acts 4:25 as being written by David, as is Psalm 95 by Hebrews 4:7).
- Asaph, a priest who served as the worship leader of ancient Israel, wrote twelve psalms (Ps. 50; 73-83).
- The sons of Korah, a guild of singers and composers of music, are credited with writing ten psalms (Pss. 42; 44-49; 84-85; 87).
- Solomon, David’s son, the third king of Israel, accounted for two psalms (Pss. 72; 127).
- Moses, the great leader of Israel and the Exodus, wrote one psalm (Ps. 90).
- Heman, a wise man, musician, an Ezrahite, a son of Korah, and founder of the Korahite choir (2 Chr. 5:12; 35:15), wrote one psalm (Ps. 88).
- Ethan, a wise man and Ezrahite, probably a Levitical singer (1 Chr. 6:42; 15:17,19), wrote one psalm (Ps. 89).
- Anonymous authors account for the remaining forty-eight psalms.

- Ezra, scribe and priest of Israel, is thought to be the author of some of the anonymous psalms.

III. Time Period For Writing

Because many different authors wrote the Psalms, the writing of these sacred songs occurred at different times, spanning a period of about one thousand years. The time of their writing reaches from approximately 1410 B.C., when the first psalm was written, to around 430 B.C, when the last psalm was written (depending upon the identity of the author of Psalm 126).

- The first psalm written, Psalm 90, was composed by Moses during Israel's forty years of wilderness wanderings (1445-1405 B.C.), probably toward the end of this time of severe testing, perhaps around 1410 B.C.
- The vast majority of the psalms were written during the kingly reigns of David (c. 1010-970 B.C.) and Solomon (c.970-930 B.C.).
- The last psalm composed, Psalm 126, is thought to have been recorded after the time of Israel's Babylonian exile, during their return to the land of Judah, around 500 B.C., or even later, about 430 B.C., if Psalm 126 was written by Ezra.

IV. Superscriptions and Notations

More than three-fourths of the psalms (116) have a superscription added to the beginning of the psalm that provides an editorial notation identifying the author, historical context, or how it should be sung. These were added after the time of their writing and were included to assist the worship leader and congregation in understanding and singing these psalms. Although these superscriptions were not a part of the original text, they are, nevertheless, considered accurate and reliable. Among the various kinds of information that these editorial additions provide are:

- 1) *Historical information.* Most of these titles provide background information about authorship, historical occasion, or personal dedication. An example of such a historical notation is Psalm 3: "A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom."
- 2) *Musical instructions.* Some of the titles were intended for the worship director, and they indicated what kind of song it is and how it is to be sung. These musical inscriptions accompany 55 psalms, possibly to aid in their use on special occasions. For example, such a superscription is found in Psalm 4: "For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm of David."
- 3) *Important pauses.* The word *Selah* has been added 71 times to the Psalms, serving as a later editorial addition that signaled a brief interlude in the psalm, either for a change of musical accompaniment, a brief interlude with stringed instruments, a call to pause and reflect upon the truth just stated, or a notice to begin a new section. Most scholars agree that *Selah* was a form of musical notation. An example is Psalm 3:4: "To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. *Selah.*"

V. Literary Types

The various psalms can be categorized by literary types, indicating the different subject matters they addressed or the various styles in which they were written. It is helpful, to identify these classifications if they are to be correctly interpreted. The basic types of psalms are:

- 1) *Wisdom psalms.* These instructive psalms provide practical guidelines for godly living and give direction for righteous living in the pursuit of God's will (Pss. 1; 37; 119).
- 2) *Royal psalms.* Describing the coming messianic rule of the Christ, these regal psalms portray him as the undisputed sovereign King over heaven and earth (Pss. 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 47; 68; 72; 89; 101; 110; 118; 132; 144).
- 3) *Lament psalms.* These highly emotionally charged psalms record the writer's heart cry to God for divine deliverance from trouble and pain (Pss. 3-7; 12-13; 22; 25-28; 35; 38-40; 42-44; 51; 54-57; 59-61; 63-64; 69-71; 74; 79-80; 83; 85-86; 88; 90; 102; 109; 120; 123; 130; 140-143).
- 4) *Imprecatory psalms.* Motivated by fiery zeal for God's glory, these provocative, and often controversial, psalms invoke God's wrath and judgment upon the psalmist's adversaries who were God's enemies. The psalmist called upon the Lord to punish the wicked and defend him as he carries out God's work in the midst of his persecutors (Pss. 7; 35; 40; 55; 58-59; 69; 79; 109; 137; 139; 144).
- 5) *Thanksgiving psalms.* These psalms express a profound awareness of deep gratitude for God's abundant blessings, whether individual or national (Pss. 8; 18; 19; 29; 30; 32-34; 36; 40; 41; 66; 103-106; 111; 113; 117; 124; 129; 135-136; 138-139; 146-148; 150).
- 6) *Pilgrimage psalms.* These festive psalms foster celebration and praise for God as Israel recalled the Lord's goodness to them as they traveled to Jerusalem for their annual feasts (Pss. 43; 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 120-134).
- 7) *Enthronement psalms.* These awe inspiring majestic psalms describe the majesty of God's sovereign rule over all his creation and the providential care by which he sustains, controls, and directs all he has made (Pss. 48; 93; 96-99).

VI. Book Divisions

The Book of Psalms was originally collected by ancient compilers as a series of smaller books in which the next book augmented the previous material. Psalm 72:20 makes this clear when it states, "This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse." This verse, no doubt, marked the end of an earlier, smaller edition of the Psalms which once concluded at this point, but later was supplemented with Psalms 73-150.

The five books of Psalms are easily recognizable because each section concludes with a climactic doxology (Pss. 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6). Some interpreters have maintained that these five books of the Psalms correspond to the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Thus, the Book of Psalms has been called "The

Pentateuch of David” because they are thought to mirror the books of the Law of Moses. These five divisions of the Psalms are as follows:

Book I: Psalms 1-41. The first forty-one psalms were probably gathered together during the early days of the Jewish monarchy by either David or Solomon. Book I was basically assigned to David. This first book highlights God’s power in creation (Pss. 8; 19) and is dominated by the themes of sin and redemption.

Book II: Psalms 42-72. These thirty-one psalms were collected and assembled at a later time to form Book II, possibly three hundred years after Book I was compiled during the reign of Judah’s king, Hezekiah (c.715-686 B.C.). If so, the “men of Hezekiah,” an active Bible committee that collected many of the proverbs of Solomon (Prov. 25:1), possibly organized these psalms into a literary unit and added them to Book I. It is also possible that these psalms were collected during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Interpreters have noted that this second book of psalms focuses upon Israel’s ruin and redemption and thus, can be related to the Book of Exodus.

Book III: Psalms 73-89. These seventeen psalms were subsequently compiled into Book III, probably during the same era by the men of Hezekiah as previously mentioned for Book II, or by Josiah, sixteenth ruler of the Southern Kingdom (640-609 B.C.). This third book begins with eleven consecutive psalms written by Asaph, a Levite who led one of the temple choirs (Pss. 73-83), and includes a few songs written by David (Pss. 86; 101; 103). These psalms center primarily upon the holiness of Israel’s sanctuary and coincides with the concern of the Book of Leviticus.

Book IV: Psalms 90-106. This cluster of seventeen psalms was collected about two hundred to three hundred years later and added to the first three books, probably during the postexilic days when Israel returned to her land under Ezra (458 B.C.) and Nehemiah (445 B.C.). This division of the Psalms focuses upon Israel’s relapse and recovery in the wilderness, echoing the theme of the Book of Numbers. Appropriately, Book IV begins with Psalm 90, the only psalm written by Moses during Israel’s forty years of wilderness wanderings. This was a severe time of testing recorded in Numbers. Book IV contains the recurring theme of God’s sovereign kingdom which dominates the kingdoms of the nations just as Numbers documents Israel’s relationship to the surrounding nations.

Book V: Psalms 107-150. These last forty-four psalms make up Book V. Like Book IV, they were probably collected and added to the Book of Psalms during the postexilic days of Ezra, almost six hundred years after Book I was collated. This fifth book focuses upon the sufficiency of God’s Word (Ps. 119) and the universal praise due to the Lord’s name (Pss. 146-150), much like the Book of Deuteronomy focuses on God and His Word.

VII. Unique and Interesting Features of The Psalms

- It was the worship hymnal of the Hebrew people.
- It is the largest book of the Bible with 150 psalms.
- It contains the most chapters of any book of the Bible. Isaiah is 2nd with 66.
- Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible with 176 verses.
- Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible, containing only two verses.
- Psalm 117 is also the middle chapter of the Bible, the very center of the 1,189 chapters found in Genesis 1 through Revelation 22.
- Psalm 118:8 is the absolute center of the 31, 173 verses contained in the Scripture, the middle verse of the entire Bible.
- The LXX has a Psalm 151 but with a notation that it is outside the number.
- Psalm 18 is the same as 2 Samuel 22.
- Psalms is written by more authors than any other book in the Bible. It is a literary collection from many men such as David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, Moses, Heman, Ethan, and others.
- Psalms was a long-term project that was approximately nine hundred to one thousand years in the making, requiring more time for its writing than all the canonical books.
- Psalms is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. Of the 360 Old Testament quotations or allusions in the New Testament, 112 are from the Psalms.

- Psalms contains more messianic prophecies than any other Old Testament book, other than possibly Isaiah. It reveals the Messiah as the Son of God (Ps. 2) and son of man (Ps. 8) in his obedience (Ps. 40:6-8), betrayal (Ps. 41:9), crucifixion (Ps. 22), resurrection (Ps. 16), ascension (Ps. 68:18), and enthronement (Ps. 110).
- There are duplicate psalms: psalms 14 and 53; 40:13-17 and 70; 60:5-12 and 108.
- A number of psalms are acrostic in Hebrew with the first word of each verse or stanza beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (Pss. 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 119, 145).

VIII. An Outline of the Psalm

I.	Introduction to the Psalms	(1-2)	Book 1
II.	David's Songs: The "Yahwistic Psalter"	(3-41)	
III.	The "Elohistic Psalter"	(42-72)	Book 2
IV.	Psalms of Asaph and Korah	(73-89)	Book 3
V.	Yahweh the King	(90-106)	Book 4
VI.	Psalms of Praise and Pilgrimage	(107-145)	Book 5
VII.	Concluding Praise	(145-150)	

IX. Guidelines for Interpretation of the Psalms

1. Identify the historical context of the psalm if possible.
From the data provided by the psalm itself and from any parallel historical information attempt to recapture the context out of which this psalm arose. Use the Psalm titles with caution; they provide a traditional interpretation, but may be too specific in some situations.
2. Diagram the psalm to see the flow of the poetry.
Because of the dominance of parallelism in Hebrew poetry, focus on:
 - a) The identification of the parallel structures.
 - b) Examine the use of repetitive devices in the psalm; refrains, inclusio, keywords, synonyms, etc.
3. Observe other literary techniques employed in the psalm: figures of speech, direct speech, ellipses, reversals, surprising turns, question and answer; etc.
4. Provide a synopsis of the psalm's primary message in one sentence.
5. Identify the psalm's literary type (Section V above) and state its goal (instruction, inspiration, admonition, celebration, mourning, confession, etc.)
6. Construct a coherent exegetical outline of the psalm that reflects its broad structure and the way in which the primary idea is developed.
7. Identify and investigate the theologically and culturally significant expressions that inform the meaning of the psalm.
8. Survey the psalm and identify the permanent theological principles taught or implied by the psalm and which need to be applied to our contemporary context and life.
9. Apply the truth to your own life, noting the Christological connections in much of the psalms.
10. Prepare a teaching outline for the psalm for your present or future use.