The Psalms of David

AN OVERVIEW

The book of Psalms—known to Jews by its Hebrew title, Tehilim, or Praises—unites Christians and Jews, who view it as an aesthetically unmatched, yet gritty and honest, guide to worship for the people of God. King David prepared this collection of songs and hymns for worship in the Temple in Jerusalem 3,000 years ago; yet the Psalms continue to inspire, comfort, and challenge us today. One Christian scholar says the total collection “became one of the most popular books in ancient Israel, and has remained so among countless millions of people throughout the centuries.”

How did we get the Psalms, how do we understand them, and what can they teach us today?

AUTHORSHIP

One Talmudic source and nearly all Orthodox Jews believe that King David was the author of all the psalms. He is known in the Bible as “the hero of Israel’s songs” (2 Samuel 23:1). Other sources say that David collected the words of Adam, Abraham, Melchizedek, Moses, ten elders, and Ezra.

Only seventy-four of the 150 psalms bear David’s name; twelve are attributed to Asaph; twelve to the sons of Korah; two to Solomon; one to Moses; and one each to Heman and Ethan. Thirty-four psalms are not attributed to any author at all.

Whoever the author or authors, the psalms uniquely gave voice to a people’s hopes, sufferings, and dreams—and they still do today. While the psalms were divinely inspired expressions of worship, lament, and wisdom, many reflected influence from surrounding cultures. The form and structure of Canaanite literature from the city-state of Ugarit, for example, is reflected in 120 of the 150 psalms. Egypt and Mesopotamia also produced psalms. Israel’s psalms, in a sense, were simply the latest and highest development of an existing art form.

David’s poetic talent, his influence, and indeed, his life can be seen throughout the psalms, and equally so in books of the Bible outside the psalms. Read his lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19–27) and his “last words” (23:1–7).

Many of the psalms correspond with events in the life of David:

- Psalm 59, when Saul sent men to watch David’s house and kill him (1 Samuel 19:11)
- Psalm 56, when David fled to Gath (1 Samuel 21:10)

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• Psalm 34, when David pretended to be insane (1 Samuel 21:13)
• Psalm 142, when David escaped to the cave of Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1)
• Psalm 52, when Doeg the Edomite informed Saul where David was (1 Samuel 22:9)
• Psalm 54, when the Ziphites betrayed David to Saul (1 Samuel 23:19)
• Psalm 57, when David was hiding from Saul in a cave (1 Samuel 24:1)
• Psalm 18, when David spared Saul (1 Samuel 24:11–12)
• Psalm 32, when David received forgiveness for his sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:13–14)
• Psalm 51, when David confessed his lustful and deceitful sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:13–14)
• Psalm 3, when David fled from Absalom (2 Samuel 15:14–16)
• Psalm 63, when Ziba refreshed David and his men (2 Samuel 16:2).

As many of the psalms have musical instructions, the author of the books of the Chronicles highlights David’s musical contributions to Temple worship (1 Chronicles 16:4–7). Ezra 3:10 points out that David prescribed the priests and Levites to worship musically when the foundation was laid. The first century historian Josephus said, “David composed songs and hymns to God in varied meters.”

It is safe to say that David’s musical genius and commitment to the worship of God cast a refreshing shadow over the entire book of Psalms.

STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Like the five books of Moses, Psalms is also divided into five books. Scholars also believe David compiled Book I (1–41) and Book IV (90–106), and wrote many of the psalms in Book II (42–72). Scholars also believe Psalms 9 and 10, and 42 and 43, respectively, were probably originally one psalm.

The psalms exhibit the following literary features of Hebrew poetry.

Word Structure: Each line contains two to four words, each of which is accented, forming a simple meter. The most common meter has three words or word units in the first line and three in the second, forming a 3+3 meter. Others are 2+2, 3+2, and 3+3+3.

Parallelism: A repetition of thought rather than sound. The basic unit is a balanced couplet with pauses at the middle and end. There are several types of parallelism, including: (1) antithetic, which provides a contrast between the lines (Psalm 90:6); (2) synthetic, in which the second line supplements or completes the first (Psalm 3:4); and (3) climactic or stair-like, in which part of the first line is repeated, moving the thought forward with an extra step, sometimes using a triplet (Psalm 29:1–2).

Acrostic Psalms: Each verse begins with a successive letter of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet (Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145). Psalm 119, meanwhile, features 22 eight-verse sections, each of which begins with a different letter.

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Scholars suggest the following main categories of the Psalms.3

Praise. “The Hebrew title, ‘Praises’ (Tehilim), defines accurately a large part of the contents of the book,” Walter Elwell notes. “Each of the first four sections concludes with a doxology, while the fifth section concludes with five psalms, each of which begins or ends with one or two ‘Hallelujahs.’ Psalm 150 sounds the call to total praise. God is to be praised for his being, for his great acts in creation, nature, and history, on both the individual and the communal level.” Examples: Psalms 9, 29, 47, 103, and 124.

Concerning the Davidic King. Also known as the Royal Psalms, these compositions refer to the king, his rule, and his relationship to the Lord. While the king enjoys an exalted relationship with God (see Psalms 2 and 110), his rule is not absolute and is subject to the conditions of God’s covenant with His people.

The Royal Psalms ultimately point beyond Israel’s earthly kings, who ruled for less than 500 years, to a coming messianic king. Examples: Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 61, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144.

Zion. “Praise of Zion,” Elwell says, “was, in fact, almost synonymous with praise of the Lord who dwelt there. Jerusalem’s continued survival, in spite of its vicissitudes, was ample demonstration of God’s enduring greatness . . . and peculiar affection for the city which housed his temple.” Examples: Psalms 48, 76, 84, 87, and 122.

Laments. There are two main kinds—national (because of drought, war, etc.; Psalms 14, 44, and 60), and individual (Psalms 13 and 22). Psalms of individual lament constitute “the backbone of the psalter” and frequently conclude with praise to God. There are fifty individual lament psalms, which can be further subdivided into imprecatory (Psalm 109), passion (Psalm 16), and penitential (Psalm 32).

Wisdom. These compositions reflect the approach of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Wisdom involves both knowing and doing the right thing, based upon God’s law. It involves both intellect and morality. Examples: Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 127, and 128.

VALUE OF THE PSALMS

The Psalms is a God-focused book. It casts a spotlight on Him as both Creator and as Covenant-Keeper. Christians and Jews see and are comforted by its clear depiction of human suffering, sin, and hope.

Rabbi Boruch Clinton says, “For centuries, Jews have turned to Psalms to give voice to their deepest feelings, both in times of great trouble and of great happiness. Psalms can unlock our hearts and draw us up towards their exalted greatness. This is a book worthy of our attention; both academic and emotional!”

As a fixed order of Hebrew prayer developed, many psalms were incorporated into the corporate prayer book.

The practice of reading a daily psalm, which began with the Levites in the Temple, has become a standard practice in the synagogue ritual in all Jewish communities. The reading of the psalm is preceded by the declaration: “Today is day [Sunday, Monday, etc.] on which the following psalm was recited in the Temple.”

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According to custom, on the first day (Sunday), Psalm 24 is recited; on the second day, Psalm 48; the third day, Psalm 82; fourth day, Psalm 94; on the fifth day, Psalm 81; on the sixth day, Psalm 93; and on the seventh, and Sabbath day, Psalm 92.4

Many Jews today recite psalms daily, some completing the entire book each week; others completing it according to a monthly cycle. Certain psalms, by custom, have been assigned for certain occasions.

For example, for those who have been rescued from a dangerous situation, Psalm 107 is recited. Those seeking guidance recite Psalm 139, and those needing God’s mercy in troubled times recite Psalm 38.

Indeed, the great Jewish thinker and commentator Nahmanides cited seventy-two verses in Psalms as appropriate for specific needs and occasions, such as healing, safety in traveling, finding lost property, winning litigation, and others.5

For Christians and Jews alike, the psalms give us divine sanction to pour out our complaints, fears, and praises to God as we await His ultimate victory. The psalms, with a main purpose of encouraging and directing Temple worship, nonetheless have spoken to individual followers after God and provided a cherished pattern for personal faith. In this, they reflect the incomparable life modeled by their greatest champion, King David.

SOURCES
Rabbi Boruch Clinton, “Psalms (Tehilim),” http://www.torah.org/learning/basics/primer/torah/psalms.html#.

ENDNOTES