



# The Psalms of David

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# The Psalms of David



## AN OVERVIEW

**T**he 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:

**Psalms 59** when Saul sent men to watch David’s house and kill him (1 Samuel 19:11)

**Psalms 56** when David fled to Gath (1 Samuel 21:10)



The poetic talent of David, his personal influence, and the landscape of his life are revealed throughout the psalms.

**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).<sup>1</sup>

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 light 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.<sup>2</sup>

**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.



Though King Saul pursued David with mortal intent, David refrained from returning harm to "the Lord's anointed."



The book of Psalms, or *Tehillim* in Hebrew (Praises), unites Christians and Jews alike in worshipping the Lord.

## CONTENT

Scholars suggest the following main categories of the Psalms.<sup>3</sup>

**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.”



The impact and influence of David and his psalms upon the children of God and our world today are well-remembered through the image of the Tower of David in the Old City of Jerusalem.



The book of Psalms brings comfort, peace, and refreshing reassurance in God’s love and care for each of us.

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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#>.

Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1988).

John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Third Edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Based on the chart in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1988), 1:585.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the discussion of Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1988), 2: 1797–98.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the discussion of Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1988), 2: 1798–1804.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the entry "Psalm of the Day," Dr. Chaim Pearl, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life and Thought* (Jerusalem: Carta, The Israel Map and Publishing Company, 1996), p. 369.

<sup>5</sup> Based on the entry "Psalms," Dr. Chaim Pearl, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life and Thought* (Jerusalem: Carta, The Israel Map and Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 369–70.

# David's Legacy of Prayer

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the renowned 20th-century leader of Yeshiva University in New York, described prayer as “the expression of the soul that yearns for God, via the medium of the word, through which the human being gives expression to the storminess of his soul and spirit.”

In other words, prayer is connecting with God through our words.

According to tradition, the practice of prayer can be traced back to Adam, continued through the examples and lives of Israel's patriarchs and matriarchs, through Moses, the kings and the prophets, into the Christian Bible, as Jesus modeled prayer for his followers throughout his life. Prayer was, and continues to be, the most natural manifestation of our relationship with God.

However, it was King David who revolutionized prayer through the gift of the Psalms that he bequeathed to us. The Psalms are largely a collection of David's own personal prayers — powerful and deep, running the gamut of emotions and human experiences, from despair to praise; gratitude to lament.

While others contributed to this collection of psalms, David is credited with the work because he compiled them and established them as a form of worship. It was David, “*the hero of Israel's songs*” (2 Samuel 23:1), who instituted the practice of worship accompanied by soul-stirring music and inspirational words.

In essence, David created the foundation for Jewish liturgy, though it would take centuries for his psalms to make their way into any kind of formal prayer text.

Prayer has always had a prominent place in Judaism. Until David, it was always spontaneous, personal, and mostly private. This kind of prayer, still practiced today, has its benefits. It is often most heartfelt and most powerful. However, the Psalms offer us a valuable alternative pathway through which we can connect with God.

Sometimes, we simply cannot find sufficient words to praise God. Or, we are often rendered speechless

when we are going through difficult times. David's beautiful prayers of praise, thanksgiving, petition, and confession, recorded in the psalms give words to our feelings, unlocking our thoughts and emotions so that they may be fully expressed to God. It was only natural that when the Jewish sages began to create a set text for prayer at the end of the Second Temple period that David's Psalms were included.

Part of what makes the Psalms so unique is that they are both our words to God, yet as part of the Bible, they are also undeniably God's words to us. This unique combination makes the Psalms the perfect vehicle where we can meet God in the most profound way.

This is why Psalms have become so essential in both the Christian and Jewish faiths. They are the words we turn to in our greatest time of need, and words of praise we sing in times of jubilation. For millennium, the Psalms have been the companion of people of faith throughout the journey of life. Through the ups and downs, good times and challenging ones, joy and despair, there is a Psalm for every moment and emotion.

Perhaps David's greatest contribution is he teaches us, through the Psalms, that we can always praise God no matter what. He concluded the book with these words, “*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD*” (Psalm 150:6).

The sages offer an alternative reading of this verse: “Praise the LORD for every breath.” As long as we are alive, there is a way and reason to praise God. Every day is a time to pray, to praise, to give thanks, to ask, and to connect with our Creator.

“*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.*” Amen!





## Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

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In 1983, Rabbi Eckstein founded the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews* (*The Fellowship*), devoting his life to building bridges of understanding between Christians and Jews and broad support for the State of Israel.

Under his leadership, *The Fellowship* now raises over \$125 million annually, making it the largest Christian-supported humanitarian nonprofit working in Israel today.

He is an internationally respected Bible teacher and acknowledged as the world's leading Jewish authority on evangelical Christians.

# Building Bridges. Saving Lives.

The *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews* was founded in 1983 by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein to promote understanding between Christians and Jews, and to build broad support for Israel through these ministry programs:

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### Isaiah 58.



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- Teaching videos on the Jewish roots of Christianity
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