

The Psalms

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While much can be gained by considering how God has interacted with people in the past, God knew that Israel needed messages which could give voice to their condition: their needs, desires, afflictions, hopes, and appeals before Him. These messages are found in the Psalms.

The psalms compose the nineteenth book in most English; in the Hebrew Bible, the collection of psalms begin the *Ketuvim* or “Writings.” Psalms is the largest book in the Bible; it is a compilation of songs written by various authors throughout Israel’s history. King David wrote at least half of the Psalms (ca. 1000 BC; 1 Samuel 16:16-23, 2 Samuel 23:1). Asaph is responsible for 12 psalms (1 Chronicles 16:17); the sons of Korah for 11 psalms (likely ca. 580-530 BCE; cf. Numbers 16:16). Other psalm authors include Moses (ca. 1400 BC), Solomon, and Ethan the Ezrahite (ca. 975 BC). Internally the Psalms are divided into five books: Psalms 1-41 are Book I; Psalms 42-72 are Book II; Psalms 73-89 are Book III; Psalms 90-106 are Book IV; and Psalms 107-150 are Book V. Since psalms featuring different authors and times are interspersed throughout the collection, these book divisions, as well as the psalm headings, seem to be added by the time of compilation, no later than the early post-exilic period (ca. 530-420 BC). The Psalms provide the “song book” of Israel, giving voice to the petitions, appeals, requests, and praise of Israel to YHWH their God.

Many psalms consist of **praise to God** (Psalms 8-9, 23, 29, 33, 45, 47, 62, 67, 84, 92-93, 95, 96-100, 111-114, 117, 125, 134-135, 144-150). Other psalms more explicitly **give thanks to God** for what He has done [Psalm 18 (cf. 2 Samuel 22:1-51), Psalms 30, 34, 40, 52, 56, 65-66, 75, 92, 107, 116, 118, 124, 136, 138].

Perhaps the greatest number of psalms involve some type of **lament**, either because of one’s own sin or the sins of others they have experienced, and asking God for assistance or expressing confidence in justice from God (Psalms 3-7, 10, 12, 13-14, 17, 22, 25, 28, 31, 36, 38-39, 41-43, 51, 54, 55-57, 59-61, 63-64, 69-71, 74, 77-80, 82, 83, 85-86, 88-90, 94, 102, 108-109, 120-121, 123, 126, 130, 137, 140-143). Many lament psalms feature *imprecations*, or *requests for destruction and/or condemnation, of enemies* (cf. Psalms 35, 58, 83, 129).

A few psalms speak of the **hope of Israel for the Messiah** to come (Psalms 2, 16, 22, 45, 69, 110); these psalms feature prominently in the New Testament as early Christians seek to prove how Jesus was the Christ (e.g. Matthew 22:44/Mark 12:36/Luke 20:42-43, 24:41-50, Acts 2:34-35, 4:25-26; 13:33, Hebrews 1:5; 5:5). Other psalms extol the king of Israel (Psalms 18, 20, 21, 72, 89, 101, 132). Some psalms are designed to provide **wisdom** to Israel, like the Proverbs (Psalms 1, 4, 11, 15, 19, 24, 26, 27, 32, 34, 37, 49, 50, 53, 73, 91, 119, 127, 128, 131, 133, 139). A few psalms are **prophetic**, warning Israel against turning away from God (Psalms 81, 82, 115); a few others **re-tell the history** of Israel (Psalms 44, 68, 78, 105, 106). Some psalms celebrate Zion, the Temple Mount (Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122). Some psalms are notable as *collections*, including the “**Hallel**” or **praise psalms**, Psalms 113-118, often sung together (as is thought in Matthew 26:30), and the songs of ascents in Psalms 120-134.

In many respects Psalms is the “heart” of the Bible; not only does the book represent the middle of the Bible as ordered in most English Bibles, but the collection has also given voice to generations of the people of God to express their praise, thanks, sufferings, hope, and life circumstances to God. The Psalms are not just for Israel; Christians can also find inspiration and voice from the Psalms to inform their prayers and songs to God (Acts 4:24-30, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, James 5:13). Let us join our voices with those of past generations and give glory and praise to God through the Psalms! {The Voice, Dec. 8, 2013}

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