

  
TEACH THE TEXT  
COMMENTARY SERIES

# Psalms

*Volume 1*  
*Psalms 1–72*

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15 16 17 18 19 20 21      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my children,  
Scott—and Britta, Ellen, Klara, and Lukas  
Rebecca—and Michael and Hannah

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# Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; this commentary is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship

but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or “Big Idea,” of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition



to interpreting the text in the “Understanding the Text” section, each unit contains a “Teaching the Text” section and an “Illustrating the Text” section. The teaching section points to the key theological themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today’s audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God’s dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, “alive and active” and “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors

# Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors' ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. *Big Idea*. For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or “Big Idea,” that drives both the passage and the commentary.
2. *Key Themes*. Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.
3. *Understanding the Text*. This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
  - a. *The Text in Context*. Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including reference to the rhetorical strategy of the book and the unit's contribution to the purpose of the book.
  - b. *Outline/Structure*. For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.
  - c. *Historical and Cultural Background*. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.
  - d. *Interpretive Insights*. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
  - e. *Theological Insights*. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.

4. *Teaching the Text.* Under this second main heading the commentary offers guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.
5. *Illustrating the Text.* At this point in the commentary the writers partner with a team of pastor/teachers to pro-

vide suggestions for relevant and contemporary illustrations from current culture, entertainment, history, the Bible, news, literature, ethics, biography, daily life, medicine, and over forty other categories. They are designed to spark creative thinking for preachers and teachers and to help them design illustrations that bring alive the passage's key themes and message.

# Preface

No book of the Old Testament has touched this writer as deeply as the Psalms. There are many reasons, some too deep for words. This book scans the depths of faith, illuminating the foundations of belief and revealing the cavernous hollows of unbelief. The sinful plight of humanity is left exposed to the scrutiny of time but is redeemed by love when the light of faith dawns, “and that right early” (Ps. 46:5 KJV). The emotional range of the Psalms is wide and deep, and because of that, worshipers throughout the centuries have been borne more freely to the throne of grace on their wings of prayer. Saints, sages, and sinners alike have read and sung the Psalms in life’s best and worst moments and have found this book to contain the words they could not draw out of their own souls.

This is the first of two volumes on Psalms that will appear in the Teach the Text Commentary Series. I will refer to discussions in that forthcoming volume occasionally—particularly to sidebars in which I give more detail on a topic or make comparisons among psalms.

In the thanksgiving mode of the Psalter, there are so many people I need to thank as “my heart overflows with a pleasing theme” (Ps. 45:1 ESV). First, I give thanks to God for the gift of the Psalms so full of comfort, admonition, hope, and joy. Second, I give thanks for the Franklin S. Dyrness Chair of Biblical Studies, and the revered man of God for whom it is named, now a member of the Church Triumphant. I began this commentary just before my eligibility for the generous research funds of this endowed chair receded into my retirement, and this project was a new beginning for me as a forty-year teaching career was coming to a close, thirty-six of them at Wheaton College. Third, I give thanks for the staff and the resources of Tyndale House, Cambridge, England, that have made the summer portion of my writing more delightful and efficient. Fourth, I give thanks for my friend and former student Dr. Brian Janeway, who has generously provided travel assistance for most of our summers at Tyndale House. Fifth, I give thanks for the editors of the Teach the Text

Commentary Series and Baker Books, who invited me to write this commentary and have offered their insightful enhancements, for it has been a labor of love. Sixth, I give thanks for the Warren Park Presbyterian Church (Cicero, IL), where I have served as pastor for the past twelve and a half years. Their generosity of study leave, and their attentive listening to my sermons on the Psalms, which have taken me already through half the book, are expressions of God’s grace. Seventh, I give thanks for my former graduate assistant, Dr. Stefanos Michalios, now a faculty member of the Greek Bible College (Athens, Greece), who kindly and expertly took on the task of reading this manuscript and, with his keen insight,

offered many improvements. Eighth, I give thanks for my wife, Rhonda, who shares my love for the Psalms, and whose patient “waiting” with me as I have worked on this project is part of that spiritual legacy about which the Psalms have so much to say. Ninth, I give thanks for my children, Scott, Britta, Ellen, Klara, and Lukas, and for Rebecca, Michael, and Hannah, who continue to affirm to me the lesson of the Psalms that “children are a heritage from the LORD” (Ps. 127:3). To this heritage I dedicate this book. *Soli Deo gloria.*

C. Hassell Bullock  
Wheaton, Illinois  
September 10, 2014

# Abbreviations

## Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Dan.	Daniel
Exod.	Exodus	Ezra	Ezra	Hosea	Hosea
Lev.	Leviticus	Neh.	Nehemiah	Joel	Joel
Num.	Numbers	Esther	Esther	Amos	Amos
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job	Obad.	Obadiah
Josh.	Joshua	Ps(s).	Psalms	Jon.	Jonah
Judg.	Judges	Prov.	Proverbs	Mic.	Micah
Ruth	Ruth	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Nah.	Nahum
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs	Hab.	Habakkuk
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1 Kings	1 Kings	Jer.	Jeremiah	Hag.	Haggai
2 Kings	2 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Zech.	Zechariah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Mal.	Malachi

## New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Luke	Luke	Col.	Colossians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom.	Romans	1 Tim.	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	2 Tim.	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal.	Galatians	Philem.	Philemon	Rev.	Revelation

## General

cf.	confer, compare	Eng.	English
chap(s).	chapter(s)	esp.	especially
e.g.	for example	et al.	and others

etc. and the rest  
 fem. feminine  
 Heb. Hebrew  
 i.e. that is  
 lit. literally  
 masc. masculine  
 no(s). number(s)  
 NT New Testament  
 OT Old Testament  
 p(p). page(s)  
 par(s). parallel(s)  
 pl. plural  
 pres. present (tense)  
 ptc. participle  
 sg. singular  
 trans. translation  
 v(v). verse(s)

### Ancient Versions

LXX Septuagint  
 MT Masoretic Text

### Modern Versions

ASV American Standard Version  
 ESV English Standard Version  
 HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible  
 JB Jerusalem Bible  
 JPS *The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (1917)  
 KJV King James Version  
 NASB New American Standard Bible  
 NEB The New English Bible  
 NIV New International Version  
 NJPS *The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures; The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (2nd ed.; 2000)  
 NKJV New King James Version

NLT New Living Translation  
 NRSV New Revised Standard Version  
 RSV Revised Standard Version

### Apocrypha and Septuagint

1–2 Macc. 1–2 Maccabees  
 Tob. Tobit

### Mishnah and Talmud

*b.* Babylonian Talmud  
*m.* Mishnah  
*y.* Jerusalem Talmud

### Secondary Sources

*ANEP* J. B. Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954.  
*GKC* E. Kautzsch, ed. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910.  
*NIDB* Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2009.  
*NIDOTTE* Willem VanGemeren, ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.  
*TLOT* Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.

# Introduction to the Psalms

## The Name of the Book

The Hebrew title of the book of Psalms is *Tehillim* (“praises”), encapsulating praise as one of the central features of the book. We get our English title from the Greek translation of the book, *Psalmoi*; the singular, *psalmos*, is the translation of the Hebrew word *mizmor*, found in many of the psalm titles. The New Testament knows the book by this title (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20). The Greek translation in the manuscript Alexandrinus (fifth century AD) titles the book *Psalterion*, a term that occurs several times in the book and means “stringed instrument.” From this term comes the often-used English name *Psalter*.

## The Nature of the Book

The book of Psalms is an anthology written and collected over several centuries.

The earliest named composer is Moses (Ps. 90), and David is the most frequent contributor to the book, with seventy-three psalms attributed or dedicated to him. The normal way of referencing David is *l'david* (“to,” “for” = “by” or “dedicated to”), and in some of those instances, per-

haps a majority, the psalm is written by David, but in others it is merely written in honor of him, sometimes using other Davidic psalms as the substance of the psalm (e.g., Ps. 86). Two psalms are connected with Solomon (72; 127). In addition to these authors, twelve psalms are attributed to Asaph (50; 73–83), and eleven to the “sons of Korah,” (42–49; 84; 85; 87;



The book of Psalms includes seventy-three psalms attributed or dedicated to David. This ivory bookbinding plaque is from the Dagulf Psalter (eighth century AD). The top register shows David directing the writing of the psalms, and the lower register depicts him singing them.



and 88, considering 42 and 43 a single psalm), both Levitical families in the time of David. One is attributed to Heman the Ezrahite (Ps. 88), and one to Ethan the Ezrahite (Ps. 89), both persons of obscurity (see the discussion on these psalms in volume 2).

Thirteen psalms have titles that provide some historical information, and all of these are attributed to David (3; 7; 18; 34; 51; 52; 54; 56; 57; 59; 60; 63; 142). While these historical titles often connect the psalm to some incident in David's life, the connection between the content and the title is sometimes difficult to detect. Yet the very fact that thirteen psalms have titles that connect them to David shows how strongly the Davidic connection of the book is, and how important history is to this collection and its interpretation. Therefore, in this commentary I will take a combination of interpretive approaches, the historical and the form-critical, both of which will produce a more robust understanding of these religious poems.

The titles also contain literary and musical terms that probably are intended to inform the readers about their performance, and we will deal with these terms as they occur in the psalms.

### Categories of Psalms

There is some latitude in current Psalms studies regarding the categories (genres) of classification for the Psalms. Because the psalms of praise and psalms of lament are so basic to the collection, I will discuss those two categories here and then discuss the other categories at the appropriate places in the commentary (see the list of sidebars). The following is a list of the principal genres in the Psalter:

1. Psalms of praise
2. Psalms of lament
3. Psalms of thanksgiving
4. Psalms of trust
5. Psalms of the earthly king
6. Psalms of the heavenly King
7. Wisdom psalms
8. Torah psalms
9. Imprecatory psalms<sup>1</sup>

### *The Anatomy of Praise*

The book of Psalms has been a source of inspiration and spiritual refuge for believers, both Jewish and Christian, for thousands of years. The emotional and spiritual appeal of the Psalms to readers is partly explained by the wide emotional range, from praise to lament, with numerous degrees in between. The Westminster Shorter Catechism verifies the notion, itself taken in part from the Psalter, that humankind's chief end is "to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."<sup>2</sup> That is to say, our vocation as Christians, our mode of existence, is "to glorify [or "praise"] God." Praise, like obedience (1 Sam. 15:22), is better than sacrifice (Ps. 69:30–31). Indeed, God has created the universe in such a way that it serves his purposes, whatever design we may impose upon it. He rules and overrules, and he turns evil into good. This is what the psalmist means by declaring, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise you" (76:10 ESV).

While praise can be a very private matter, it often—if not most often—carries a cohortative force, inviting others to join in:

Let everything that has breath praise  
the LORD.  
Praise the LORD. (Ps. 150:6)

## Psalms of Praise

The two extreme moods of the Psalter are *praise* and *lament*, which are also the substance of the two major categories of psalms.<sup>a</sup> The two modes of prayer, however, are *praise* and *petition*,<sup>b</sup> and they are interspersed in the prayers of the Psalter.

“Psalms of praise” is a general category—roughly synonymous to Gunkel’s “hymns”<sup>c</sup>—whose fundamental moods are enthusiasm, adoration, reverence, praise, and exaltation, especially lauding God’s wonderful deeds in Israel’s history. Some of these may also be simultaneously classified in other genres.<sup>d</sup>

### Psalms of Praise

8	66A	99	113	145
19A <sup>e</sup>	68	100	114	146
29	93	104	117	147
33	96	105	134	148
47	97	106	135	149
65	98	111	136	150

<sup>a</sup> Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 18.

<sup>b</sup> Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 152.

<sup>c</sup> Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 22–65.

<sup>d</sup> This is Hans-Joachim Kraus’s list of psalms of praise, *Psalms*, 1:43, following F. Crüsemann.

<sup>e</sup> “A” denotes the first part of a psalm that is considered by many to be two psalms in one.

Lewis comments on this aspect of praise even in our common life: “I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: ‘Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?’ The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about.”<sup>3</sup> Lewis further comments on the summative nature of praise: “If it were possible for a created soul fully (I mean, up to the full measure conceivable in a finite being) to ‘appreciate,’ that is to love and delight in, the worthiest object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give this delight perfect expression, then that soul would be in supreme beatitude.”<sup>4</sup>

It should not, therefore, surprise us that at the culmination of the history of redemption, the whole creation joins in consummate praise of God: “Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!’” (Rev. 19:6–7a).

### The Anatomy of Lament

The psalms of lament constitute the opposite category from praise. The mood of the psalms gravitates between these

two poles, each of which merits a genre of psalm as its expression. They are the opposite poles of life, with many degrees in between. Laments arise out of difficult and trying circumstances, and they, like praises, provide an index to the spiritual personalities of the psalmists.<sup>5</sup> For some reason, buried in our subconscious mind, we do not seem to be as comfortable with lament as we are with praise, especially



The psalms of lament were responses to difficult circumstances such as the situation illustrated in this Assyrian relief, where five women watch from their city wall and raise their arms in submission while the victorious Assyrian army parades past (Nimrud palace relief, 865–860 BC).

## Psalms of Lament

Like psalms of praise, laments may sometimes be simultaneously classified in another category. They fall into individual laments and community laments.

**Psalms of Lament**

Individual Laments			Community Laments	
3	23	63	44	85
4	27	69	60	90
5	30	71	74	94
6	31	91	77	123
7	32	102	79	126
11	35	103	80	137
13	39	130	83	
17	51			
22	57			

in worship. Yet, as Witvliet reminds us, “when practiced as an act of faith, lament can be a powerfully healing experience.”<sup>6</sup> In the Psalms some occasions for lament are sin, defeat in battle, persecution, criticism, abandonment, illness, and doubt. Just looking at the list, we can easily see how therapeutic a service of lament, uninhibited by social constraints, could be.<sup>7</sup>

Claus Westermann capitalizes on the emotional states of praise and lament for his classification of the Psalms. He further subdivides the psalms of lament into laments of the people and laments of the individual.<sup>8</sup> The essential elements of lament, according to our definition, are two: the lament and the reason for lamenting. The lament of the individual generally will include one or a combination of three complaints: against one’s enemies, against God, or against oneself.

### Hebrew Poetry

One does not have to read many of the psalms to recognize that they are poetry.

Modern English translations render them in verse form (but the KJV does not). Hebrew poetry is different from the classical poetry of the Western world that employs rhyme, rhythm, and meter. In contrast, there is no identifiable effort to give rhyme to Hebrew poetry. And since Hebrew poetry was basically intended to be sung or to be accompanied by musical instruments, there is a natural rhythm involved, especially dependent upon stressed and unstressed syllables, but even that does not produce the kind of strict rhythm that classical Western poetry is known for. Nor are we much better informed about meter in Hebrew poetry. However, counting the stressed syllables in a line of Hebrew poetry has become the favored way of measuring meter. Although the ancient language had no way of indicating stress, the Masoretes, a group of Jewish scholars between the seventh and eleventh centuries AD, studied the Hebrew text and gave it a system of vowels and punctuation that the ancient written language did not have. These additions, while facilitating the reading of the text, indirectly contribute to our understanding of the text as well. The punctuation marks divide a verse into thought units, which would be equivalent to our phrases and clauses, and the number of stressed syllables in each unit becomes the measuring stick. But even that standard of measurement is often dubious. By that system, a line is known by the Latin term *colon* (pl. *cola*; Greek *stichos*, pl. *stichoi*). When cola combine to form the larger units, these are named by a Latin prefix, giving us *bicola* (two units) and *tricola* (three units). Since the reader needs to have a knowledge of Hebrew to understand this division and utilize

it as an interpretive tool, I have chosen to use these terms only rarely. Instead I will refer to half verses to indicate the middle of the thought unit as the Masoretes have marked them.<sup>9</sup>

In modern times attention has been drawn to the feature of *parallelism* that distinguishes Hebrew poetry. That simply means that lines of text occur in parallel, and this sets up a certain kind of relationship between the lines. When one line is followed by another line that essentially restates the thought of the first line, it is called *synonymous parallelism*. In the strict sense, there is no genuine synonymous parallelism, however, because each new line adds another nuance to the thought, even though it may be slight. Some call this second phenomenon *focusing*. When the first line expresses a thought and the parallel line introduces a contrary or diverse thought, it is called *antithetic parallelism*.

**Synonymous Parallelism**

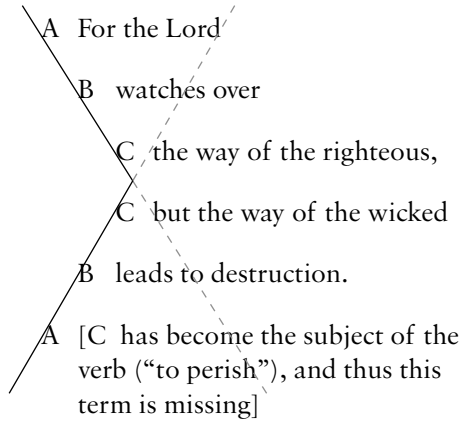
A The One enthroned  
 B in heaven  
 C laughs;  
 A' the Lord  
 C' scoffs at them. (Ps. 2:4)

The Masoretes have divided the verse into halves, indicated in the English translation by the semicolon. The first line (colon) of Psalm 2:4 is made up of three word units, and the second line is composed of two word units (the latter unit indicated by the *maqef*, one of the punctuation marks used to combine two or more words). The scanning pattern would then be indicated as 3:2 (three word units + two word units). Note that the second part of

C' in the second line has no correspondent in the first line. Obviously, however, C' provides the object for both verbs (“laughs” and “scoffs”).

**Antithetic Parallelism**

Psalm 1:6 is scanned similarly:



There are two features we should be aware of in Psalm 1:6. One is parallelism, the two units being parallel: B/B' and C/C'. Interestingly, the subject “LORD” in A is not paralleled in the second line, but a new subject, “the way of the wicked,” is introduced. The second feature is that C has changed places in the verse for the purpose of emphasizing “the way of the wicked”; C' has been placed first in the second line, putting C and C' in juxtaposition for a sharp contrast. This is a partial *chiasm*, which, if full, would put the important terms at the points of the left side of the Greek letter *chi* (X).

**The Place of Psalms in the Biblical Canon**

The placement of the book of Psalms in our English translations follows the order

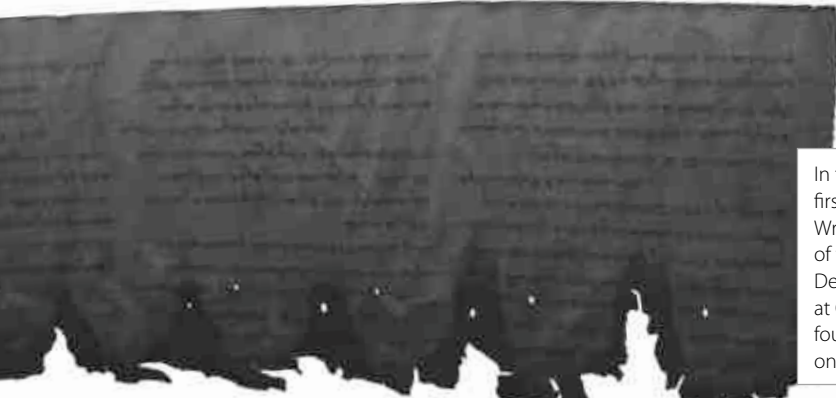
of the Greek Septuagint (LXX) and puts the book second in order of a series of poetic books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. A chronological sequence probably underlies this order, since Job was considered to have lived in the patriarchal era and to predate David, and then the book associated with David (Psalms) comes next on the timeline, followed by those books associated with David's son Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs).

However, the Hebrew Bible has three major divisions: Torah (Law or Pentateuch), Prophets, and Writings. The book of Psalms is first in order in the third division, very likely answering to a theological scheme. Since the Torah is the foundational division, and the Prophets, in second position, were considered in Jewish tradition to be interpreters of the Torah, Psalms heads up the third division because it was thought to be a collection of poems describing the Torah life. Psalm 1 is the first indication of this perspective on the book. Luke refers to the third division by the name "Psalms" in Luke 24:44: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

## Trends in Psalms Studies

The book of Psalms has exercised a power in Judaism and Christianity that exceeds the communicative power of words. Calvin calls the book an "anatomy of all parts of the soul,"<sup>10</sup> because Psalms touches every surface of life as well as the inner recesses of the heart. Luther, using a different metaphor, calls it the "little Bible,"<sup>11</sup> because it is a compendium of Old Testament faith, history, and theology. There is no doubt that both of these Reformation commentators saw the book as an anthology of biblical theology. And it can be said with some confidence that this view of the Psalms continues into the twenty-first century, even though the way of looking at the Psalms has changed tremendously since the sixteenth century.

Calvin and Luther, in fact, viewed Psalms as having been written in the crucible of history, and in order to understand the book's message, they sought to discover the historical circumstances that produced it, when, of course, those circumstances could be discerned. In the twentieth century the form-critical method, developed particularly at the hand of Gunkel,<sup>12</sup> shifted the context of Psalms composition from history to liturgy. The Psalms, he insisted, were written for temple worship, and he sought to interpret them in this framework, searching



In the Hebrew Bible, Psalms was the first book in the section known as Writings. Shown here is a portion of the Psalms Scroll, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls found in Cave 11 at Qumran. It includes psalms not found in the Bible as well as forty-one canonical psalms.

for worship occasions and specific liturgies when the Psalms would have been used in temple services. Of course, it should be noted that this approach was not alien to the “historical” method, but form criticism made temple worship the primary focus, and history took a backseat to liturgy.

In recent years scholarly attention made another shift intended to enhance the form-critical approach, not replace it. Wilson is largely responsible for this new perspective, which he has developed in his watershed dissertation, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*.<sup>13</sup> His focus aims at understanding the editorial process that brought together the Hebrew Psalter, which was edited over several centuries. The underlying assumption of Wilson’s *canonical* approach is that the editors of the book had a shaping purpose in mind as they put the book together.

While we do not know when the book of Psalms was divided into five component books, we must assume that it was early, judging from the doxologies that conclude each book. While some believe these doxologies were appended to each book sometime near the final editing of the Psalter, there are those who insist that some of the doxologies, particularly the one at the end of Book 2 (72:18–19), belonged to the original psalm. In any event, they certainly belonged to the book at an early period of its history, for they are included in the Septuagint and the earliest Hebrew manuscripts. Thus they represent editorial lines that should be taken into account. One might even wonder if the editor of Book 1 set the precedent by closing the first Davidic collection of psalms with a doxology, and the subsequent editors followed this pattern. I am obviously assuming that

the books were edited seriatim and were, for the most part, kept together as a collection, most likely by the Levites. Later additions were enhancements, although it is possible that some adjustments were made to already established macrocollections. (See comments on Psalm 106:47–48.)

### The Structure and Composition of the Psalter

The Psalter is the final product of a complex history of composition and editing that extended over several centuries. We have already noted that the book was divided into five books at an early stage, which was done perhaps to reflect the five books of the Torah, but there is no evidence that the Torah and the Psalms were ever coordinated in the synagogue readings as were the Torah and the Prophets. There are strong indications that these five books were edited with a view to Israel’s history, as we will explain below. While we do not find references to the five books until the *Midrash on the Psalms*, which was edited around the tenth century AD (but contains materials that originated much earlier), the Septuagint contains the doxological conclusions to each of the five books as they are found in the Hebrew Psalter. That dates the five-fold division at least to the early Christian era, and we can safely assume it was earlier than that, and likely belonged to the era(s) of the editorial process.<sup>14</sup>

It has been the general practice to discuss the composition of the book in terms of Books 1–3 and 4–5. However, the first macrostructure seems to have been Psalms 3–41, with Psalms 1–2 constituting an introduction to the collection.<sup>15</sup> I suggest that this collection came together earlier rather

## The Five Books of the Psalter

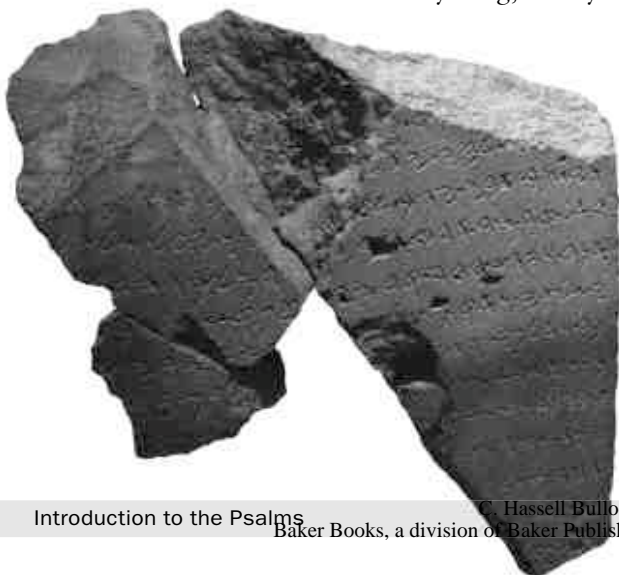
- Book 1: Psalms 1–41
- Book 2: Psalms 42–72
- Book 3: Psalms 73–89
- Book 4: Psalms 90–106
- Book 5: Psalms 107–50

than later because of the strong interest in the life of David and his dynasty and anything Davidic. We can probably speak about a literary renaissance during or soon after Solomon’s reign, and this first macrostructure may belong to that era. The division of the kingdom (931 BC) was a time when the northern tribes seceded from the southern kingdom (Judah and Benjamin) for the purpose of distancing themselves both politically and religiously (1 Kings 12:25–33). It would be surprising if literary activity was not part of that political and religious complex, particularly in view of David’s and Solomon’s literary legacies in the books of Kings.

The architectural design of the first three books (Pss. 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; see the sidebar “The Five Books of the Psalter”) puts a royal seal on this macrocollection (Pss. 2–89) by installing psalms of the earthly king, or royal

psalms, in initial and final positions of the collection (Pss. 2 and 89). When the editor (likely the final editor) installed Psalm 1 in its lead position, Psalm 2 was probably already in place as the preface to an early edition of the Psalter that consisted of Psalms 2–89, or Books 1, 2, and 3. Psalm 2 celebrates the Lord’s triumph over the enemies of his kingdom, while Psalm 89 ponders the humiliation that David’s dynasty had suffered and asks how long God would permit Israel’s enemies to taunt them (89:49–51).<sup>16</sup>

Book 1, with the exception of Psalms 1 and 2, is largely held together by the name and reputation of David, with all psalms attributed to him, except Psalms 1, 2, 10, and 33. Psalms 40–41 form a conclusion to the collection. Psalm 40 appropriately profiles David as the righteous man whose “delight” (*hapatsti*; NIV: “desire”; 40:8) is to do God’s will, just as Psalm 1 describes him as the one whose “delight [*heptso*] is in the law of the LORD” (1:2). The use of the term “blessed” (*’ashre*) occurs in 40:4 and 41:1, corresponding to the same term that introduces the book (1:1) and concludes the introduction at 2:12. But Psalms 1 and 2 likely picked the term up from Psalms 40 and 41, rather than vice versa, because these first two psalms were added much later in the editorial process, perhaps with the completion of the second macrostructure (Pss. 3–72) or the third (Pss. 3–89), and some would say even the final edition of the book.<sup>17</sup>



The collection of literary pieces that make up the book of Psalms may have come together because of the strong interest in the life of David and his dynasty. Shown here is an Aramaic inscription from 840 BC that refers to “the house of David.” It is the only ancient text outside the Bible that mentions David and his dynasty.



The editing that produced Book 2 (Psalms 42–72) probably took place during the Babylonian exile, providing hope to the Israelite community far from home in Babylon. From 10 to 25 percent of the population of Judah was deported. This Assyrian palace relief shows families being deported after their city was conquered by the armies of Tiglath-pileser III (Nimrud, eighth century BC).

Book 2 (Pss. 42–72) contains several minicollections of psalms that have been preempted for this expanded edition of psalmody, the largest being the Korah psalms (42–49) and Davidic psalms (51–65; 68–70). Included are two other author-attributed psalms, an Asaph psalm (Ps. 50) and a psalm “Of Solomon” (Ps. 72 title). Other clusters of psalms in Book 2 have terms in their titles that connect them: Psalms 52–55 (*maskil*), Psalms 56–59 (*miktam*), Psalms 62–68 (*mizmor*), Psalms 65–68 (*shir*).<sup>18</sup> Since some of these overlap with the Davidic psalms, it is difficult to know whether they were independent collections outside the Davidic psalms. It certainly appears, however, that the David collections form the heart of the first two books (see “The Editing of Book 2” in the unit on Ps. 70).

Judging from the portrait of the “poor and needy” in Psalm 70 (see v. 5), picked

up from Psalm 40:13–17, and the allusion to “his [God’s] prisoners” (69:33; NIV: “captive people”), the editing of Book 2 likely took place during the Babylonian exile. In that historical context, David has become the paradigm of the “poor and needy,” identifying with the exiled community and speaking words of assurance and hope.

The first psalm of Book 3 (Ps. 73) forms a companion to Psalm 72 in the sense that Psalm 72 prays that God may endow the king with justice (see 72:1). Psalm 73 puts the problem in the practical context of the prosperity of the wicked. While Psalm 73 may have been composed as a personal lament, in the larger structure of Book 3 it is given a national setting. The community laments of this collection bring the exile into focus again (Pss. 74; 79; 80; 83; 85:1–8; 89:38–51),<sup>19</sup> while Psalm 89 reveals most clearly the time frame for the editing of Book 3 as the exile, since it deals with the failed Davidic covenant. The earliest possible date for the completion of this collection therefore would be soon after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BC. It may be of significance that Book 3 contains only one Davidic psalm (Ps. 86). The inclusion of Psalm 86 would mean that an editor at some point thought it inappropriate to have a macrocollection that was David-less, and he put this psalm together to fill that void—it is made up of short quotes from other Davidic psalms. Perhaps the low David profile of this book is due to the waning confidence in the Davidic covenant or, at least, the confusion over its seeming failure, as reflected in Psalm 89.



Wilson has drawn attention to the placement of three royal psalms: at the beginning of the macrocollection of Psalms 2–89 (Ps. 2), at the end of Book 2 (Ps. 72), and the end of Book 3 (Ps. 89);<sup>20</sup> the placement of these royal psalms makes all the more sense in view of the hopes that the monarchy would revive. Looking ahead, Hossfeld and Zenger see those hopes as the anchor of Book 4 (e.g., Ps. 102:18–22), suggesting that Book 4 is, in an oversimplified way, the “proclamation of YHWH’s universal royal rule.”<sup>21</sup>

Book 4 (Pss. 90–106) opens with Israel confessing their sins in the voice of Moses “the man of God,” affirming God as Israel’s refuge, and setting God’s vengeance in the context of history, even if it takes a thousand years.<sup>22</sup> While no other psalms are attributed to Moses, his name does appear seven times in Book 4 (Pss. 90 title; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32), recalling Moses’s role in the exodus from Egypt (esp. 105:26–42). Moses’s career was not unconnected to Abraham’s, for the exodus and the possession of the land of Canaan were the divine fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham (105:42). Psalm 92, “For the Sabbath day” (title), follows the confession of sin in Psalm 90, with its prayer that God’s favor will rest upon Israel (90:17), and Psalm 91, a psalm of trust, that reaffirms Israel’s trust in Yahweh, who has ostensibly failed them in the defunct covenant of David (Ps. 89). But with Book 4 a new confidence in the kingdom of God begins to build, and Psalm 92 celebrates not only the weekly Sabbath but the Sabbath day of history, or the eschatological kingdom of God, when the Lord will reign (Pss. 93–100).

The “Yahweh reigns” (or “Yahweh is King”) psalms, Psalms 93–100, constitute one of the smaller collections of psalms that make up Book 4. Hossfeld and Zenger speculate that this particular collection was the conclusion of a macrocollection of the Psalms (2–100) at one point in the editorial process.<sup>23</sup> While Psalm 100 does sound the climactic theme of entering the Lord’s courts, I would prefer to see this minicollection as a theological reaffirmation of Yahweh’s kingship over against the failed Davidic dynasty, putting the former in the light of the latter, thus having the potential for changing the exiles’ perspective—the Lord reigns even though other monarchs have momentarily preempted his kingdom. Moreover, the figures of Abraham, Moses, and Aaron shine the spotlight on the Mosaic (Ps. 105:45) and Abrahamic covenants (105:8–11), underscoring the promises of God that have ostensibly failed. Book 4 closes as it began (90:8) with Israel’s confession of sin (106:6–7), and with the prayer that God may gather them from among the nations (106:47).

Book 5 (Pss. 107–50) then is poised to reaffirm God’s enduring love (*hesed*) and to call the “redeemed of the LORD” (107:2) to praise God. With Hossfeld and Zenger, we may consider Psalms 107–36 as a “thanksgiving liturgy for the restoration and renewal of Israel.”<sup>24</sup> It contains the hopes of Israel fulfilled in the restoration of the nation and the return of the exiles (e.g., Ps. 126). The restoration was more than a return to the land. It was, more important, a restoration of worship in Zion. Thus Psalms 135–36 form a liturgical conclusion to the collection made up largely of the Passover Hallel (113–18) and

the “Pilgrim Psalter” (120–34). These are historical psalms in praise of the God of Israel’s history, the kind that are called for by Psalm 134:1.<sup>25</sup> It was a history that grew out of God’s “love” (*hesed*), and “his love endures forever.” In the middle of this collection is Psalm 119, celebrating the Torah, which was God’s instrument of making Israel his people. Another Davidic collection (Pss. 138–45) forms the penultimate conclusion to Book 5 and balances the final collection of Davidic psalms against the beginning David collection. These psalms are prayers to God, ending with a call to “all flesh” (NIV: “every creature”) to praise the Lord (145:21).

The five concluding psalms (Pss. 146–50) are “Hallelujah” (“Praise the LORD”) psalms that begin and end with this command of praise, Psalm 150 ending with a double “Hallelujah.” David is absent from these psalms, and the praise of God has become the pure praise of the eschatological kingdom, including Israel and the nations. A date for Book 5 is difficult, but obviously it is the latest installment to the Psalter, and it postdates the return of the exiles. Perhaps the time of Nehemiah in the middle of the fifth century BC would be plausible, although it could be a bit later.

When the preacher and teacher engage the Psalms in the pulpit or at the lectern, they need to keep in mind that this book is not merely a “list” of poems that have no relationship to each other. Rather, these



Book 5 of Psalms contains the praises of Israel as the nation is restored and the exiles return after the conquest of Babylon by the Persian king Cyrus. The cuneiform cylinder shown here records the reforms of Cyrus, which included the return of captive peoples to their homeland and the restoration of their temples (539–530 BC).

timeless compositions are intended to be viewed in the “neighborhood” where the particular psalm stands, studied in the larger context of the book in which they are collected (compare Pss. 14 and 53), and interpreted in the broadest terms of the purpose of the book as set out in the introductory psalm, to instruct the reader in the spiritual

life of Torah. The commentary will attempt to prompt the reader in that exercise.

### Reading between the Lines

The five books of the Psalter have been collected with the subsidiary purpose of highlighting certain theological concepts and historical eras. With our discussion of the psalms in each book, these thematic emphases will become clearer (for the historical setting, see “The Structure and Composition of the Psalter” above). The individual psalms are often connected by common themes and shared vocabulary, and in other instances, one psalm may answer a question or respond to a query raised by a previous psalm. For example, Psalm 14, in its God-denying world, describes Yahweh looking down from heaven to see if there is anyone who seeks after God (14:2), and Psalm 15 provides a description of those who may enter the Lord’s house, affirming that there are still those who seek God and satisfy his demands for entering his presence. Representing a slightly different relationship, the second half of Psalm 19 describes the redeeming

qualities of the Torah, and Psalm 20:7 follows with a formula of faith that shows David, rather indirectly, to be a keeper of the Torah (see “The Text in Context” in the unit on Ps. 20). These subtle and implicit connections are built into the editorial plan. Thus the individual psalms constitute the infrastructure, and the way they are put together produces a rhetorical voice that we hear between the lines of the psalm. This is called the *associate reading* of the text, because we are dealing not so much with the historical David, especially with his moral and personal flaws, but with the rhetorical David who arises out of the editorial plan of the book. In fact, the editor(s) is not interested in wiping David’s palette clean and starting a new personality sketch, but leaves the moral flaws in place—they often emerge (e.g., Ps. 51)—and shines the editorial light on the David who both is and seeks to become the righteous man. It involves

both a selective use of the content of the Psalms and a delicate arrangement of the poems in the larger framework. These observations are often discussed in the commentary. See also the Additional Insights section



The psalmist uses the language of the Torah and may be addressing how a life lived according to the Torah would look. Here modern Jews read from a Torah scroll at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

“David as the Prototype of the ‘Poor and Needy’” following the unit on Psalm 86.

A second observation on the between-the-lines readings is the use of the language of the Torah (also other OT books) in the Psalms. The Psalms teach the Torah life (see Ps. 1) by allusions to heroes and events and by using the language of the Torah. That is to say, the psalmists’ knowledge of the personalities and language of the Torah becomes the dialect with which they describe and prescribe the spiritual posture of the community they belong to and speak to, as well as their own spiritual direction.<sup>26</sup> For example, Psalm 17:8 employs two metaphors from the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:10–11): “the apple of your eye” and “the shadow of your wings.”<sup>27</sup> Applied by Moses to the nation in Deuteronomy, these metaphors are applied to the psalmist in Psalm 17 (a prayer of David), which amounts to a transfer of God’s special affection and tender care of Israel to the individual psalmist. Further, Psalm 17:13 recalls the words of Moses when the ark set out on its journey: “Rise up, LORD” (see Num. 10:35). These were combative words, calling Yahweh to rise up and scatter his enemies. These words in this context (other occurrences are Pss. 3:7; 7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 74:22; 82:8; 132:8) summon Yahweh to David’s rescue from his enemies and apply the corporate prayer of Numbers 10:35 to the personal situation of David, clarified in 17:14: “By your hand save me from such people, LORD.” Framing the psalmist’s dilemma in those Torah texts made his relationship to God all the more intimate and engaging and further intimated the psalmist’s connection to ancient Israel, especially placing him theologically in covenant community. It is part of



The Psalms have been incorporated into worship over the centuries and were meant to be sung or chanted while accompanied by musical instruments. This illumination from a liturgical book from the fifteenth century depicts monks singing (ms. 24, leaf 3v, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles).

the power of the Psalms, and the kind of application that we ourselves make when we read them in light of our own personal circumstances. John Calvin's commentary is an excellent illustration of this hermeneutical principle, already validated by the psalmists themselves.

### The Psalms in Worship

Quite obviously the Psalms were written to be sung or chanted to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The Jewish tradition, of course, is the primary example of the use of the Psalms in worship, both in the temple and in the synagogue. In general, Christians have followed this tradition and as a rule have used this spiritual resource in their receptor languages without alteration. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions are the lead examples of the Christian use of the Psalms in worship, and Protestants have adopted this book as their book of prayer,

led by Martin Luther and John Calvin and their associates. The practice of paraphrasing the Psalms and setting them to Western metrical form for singing was the practice in the Geneva community, and Calvin's colleague Theodore Beza produced the *Genevan Psalter* with all 150 psalms in 1562, the end product of several editions of that style. Its sibling and the forerunner of the *Scottish Psalter* was the revision of the 1562 edition by two Edinburgh ministers, Robert Pont and John Craig, published in 1564.

These traditions have been transferred to America and in the modern era have taken their form in such examples as the Christian Reformed Church's *Psalter Hymnal* (1959) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America's *Book of Psalms for Singing* (1973), and more recently, *Psalms for All Seasons: A Complete Psalter for Worship*, produced by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship at Calvin College.<sup>28</sup> Both the musical nature and the potent theological and spiritual resources of the Psalter are hopefully undergoing a rediscovery in the churches of America, as instruments of both praise and lament, and all the degrees of worship expression in between.