

Scripture Guide

The Psalms

Biblical Context

The title of the book derives from the Hebrew to Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, that was written around the 3rd century BC. The Septuagint titles the book “Psalms,” a Hebrew translation of the word “Mizmor” meaning “song.” Prior to the Septuagint, the book was called the Tehilim, the Hebrew word for “Praise.”¹

The Psalms also offers a wide collection of authors, dates, themes, theological discourses, and literary devices. Regarding authorship, King David is attributed to have written the most Psalms (73 total), followed by Asaph (12), the sons of Korah (11), Solomon and Moses (3), Heman and Ethan (2), the rest are anonymous (49). A number of King David’s additions into the psalter were autobiographical and included the following:

- Psalm 3 - David escapes from and battles Absalom (2 Sam 15-17)
- Psalm 7 - David’s persecution by Saul
- Psalm 18 - David delivered from Saul (2 Samuel 22)
- Psalm 30 - the dedication of the temple by his son Solomon (1 Kings 8:63)
- Psalm 34 - David escaping danger from King Achish of Gath (1 Sam 21:12-22:1)
- Psalm 51 - David’s repentance after his confrontation with Nathan (2 Samuel 11-12)
- Psalm 52 - David goes to Ahimelech while on the run from Saul (1 Sam 22:9-19)
- Psalm 54 - David flees to the Ziphites while on the run from Saul (1 Sam 23:19)
- Psalm 56 - David is captured by the Philistines in Gath (1 Sam 21:10-11)
- Psalm 57 - David escapes from Saul into a cave (1 Sam 22:1, 24:3)
- Psalm 59 - Saul sends men to kill David (1 Sam 19:11)
- Psalm 60 - David’s victory (2 Sam 8:1-14)
- Psalm 63 - David in the desert (2 Samuel 15-17 or 1 Sam 23:14-15)
- Psalm 142 - David escapes from Saul (same as Ps 57)

Along with writing a large share of the Psalms, David also introduced musical accompaniment into the spiritual formation of Israel. His music expertise (1 Samuel 16:23, 18:10, 19:9) would later become the bedrock of how the nation worshipped (1 Chronicles 13:8, 15:16, 25:1). In so doing, the Psalms would later become the songbook for the Jewish people.

Concerning the dates, the Psalms are written as early as the 13th century BC by Moses (Psalm 90) and as late as the 7th century BC after Israel’s exile (Psalm 137).

Concerning the literary structure, the Psalms is broken down into five main sections - or books.²

¹ “By the first-century a.d. it was referred to as the “Book of Psalms” (Lk 20:42; Ac 1:20).” Intro to Psalms. *Biblica: The International Bible Society*. <https://www.biblica.com/resources/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-psalms/>

²“... the question of whether there is an overarching scheme that governs all 150 psalms remains a recurring topic in scholarly discussion. It is entirely possible that those who compiled the Psalter arranged the individual psalms to address the concerns of their age. The difficulty is that many structural schemes have been proposed but none has won universal agreement, nor does any of

- Book 1 - 1-41 - grouped within this book, Psalms 1-2 serve as an introduction to both Book 1 and the entire psalter
- Book 2 - 42-72
- Book 3 - 73-89
- Book 4 - 90-106
- Book 5 - 107-150 - grouped within this book, the Egyptian Hallel (113-118), the value of the torah (119), the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120–134), and the Hallelujah psalms (146–150).

Within the literary structure, there are also numerous literary devices employed by the authors including word imagery (Psalm 1), metaphor (Psalm 23:1), simile (Psalm 1:3), hyperbole (Psalm 42:3), and apostrophe (Psalm 148:3). Literary devices are helpful to keep in mind as one reads the Psalms, especially the Psalms that offend our “Western senses.”³

In the sermon, we mentioned Psalms of gratitude and lament - the collection also contains other genres such as doxology (8, 19:1-6, 33, 66:1-12, 67, 95, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150), impreccatory (35, 69, 83, 88, 109, 137, 140), penitential (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143).

Personal Application

First, The Psalms show us that God's people are a singing people. This is not optional, but an ancient command and practice that God's people have been doing together for thousands of years. Singing drives theology deeper into our souls - to cite the African theologian Augustine of Hippo, “He who sings prays twice.”

Second, The Psalms remind us of the content of our singing - God is at the center, not us. Thus, singing (and praying) truths about God to God ballasts our lives in the reality of who He is, what He has done, and what He will do.

Third, the Psalms remind us of the posture of our singing - we see commands to physically clap, shout, and raise our hands before God when we sing (Ps 47:1, 63:4, 98:4-9, 134:2).⁴ In doing so, we train ourselves to be a people who work the theological truths of Scripture into our physical reality.

them seem fully persuasive...But the absence of an overall structural scheme is no surprise when dealing with a songbook, which is what the Psalter is.” Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 935–941). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

³ One of the more notable “problematic passages” is Psalm 137:9, “Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” Here, as is the case for other biblical text, the context and literary approach is crucial in understanding the author's intent. The psalmist is evoking the literary device of hyperbole to connote his feelings towards the things and people that go against God's good rule. For more unpacking on this Psalm, consult “Dashing the Little Ones Against the Rock - Does This Verse Really Belong in Scripture?” *The Gospel Coalition*.

<https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/dashing-little-ones-rock-verse-really-belong-scripture/>

⁴ “the psalms do not simply *express* emotions: when sung in faith, they actually *shape* the emotions of the godly. The emotions are therefore not a problem to be solved but are part of the raw material of now-fallen humanity that can be shaped to good and noble ends. The psalms, as songs, act deeply on the emotions, for the good of God's people. It is not “natural” to trust God in hardship, and yet the Psalms provide a way of doing just that, and enable the singers to trust better as a result of singing them.” Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 935–941). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.