

Psalms

Biography / Overview

The book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter, is the first book of the third section of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) called Ketuvim, and a book of the Old Testament. The book is an anthology of Hebrew religious hymns, divided into five sections, each ending with a doxology, a hymn of praise. There are several types of psalms, including hymns or songs of praise, communal laments, royal psalms, imprecation, and individual thanksgivings. While many passages are attributed to the biblical King David and other biblical figures, modern scholars argue that Psalms' contents were not finalized until the 1st century CE.

The Book of Psalms is one of the most widely familiar and most frequently quoted books of the Hebrew Bible. Psalms has significantly impacted Western literature, theology, funerary practices, music, and more. The unnoted traditions of musical Psalms predate Christianity, extending to early Greco-Roman and Israelite traditions. Sung Psalms, or hymns, are at the core of many Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, including the Catholic Mass. This musical tradition carried on through Classical musicians, such as Antonín Dvořák and Felix Mendelssohn, and contemporary artists, such as Steve Reich and Prince Far I.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalms> ,
<https://www.milkenarchive.org/articles/view/the-book-of-psalms-and-its-musical-interpretations/>)

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Hebrew Texts

Masoretic Text (MT): ~ 5th Century BCE (completed)

The authoritative Hebrew version of the Psalms, preserved by Jewish scribes known as the Masoretes. The standard scholarly edition is the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS), which is widely used for academic study and translation work.

(<https://archive.org/details/biblia-hebraica-stuttgartensia-bhs/Biblia%20Hebraica%20Stuttgartensia%20BHS/>)

The MT arranges the Psalms into five books and includes superscriptions (titles) for many psalms, indicating authorship, musical instructions, or historical context.

(<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/reading-psalm-superscriptions-through-the-centuries/>)

Greek Texts

Septuagint (LXX): late 3rd Century BCE

The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, including the Psalms, produced in the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE. The Septuagint often differs in order and content from the MT and includes additional psalms (e.g., Psalm 151).

The Septuagint Psalms were the primary version used by early Christians and are still authoritative in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

(https://orthodox-stl.org/files/fr_lazarus_moore_the_septuagint_psalms_in_english.pdf)

Dead Sea Scrolls

Qumran Psalms Scrolls: Discovered 1947–1956

Over forty manuscripts or fragments of Psalms were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, making Psalms the most represented biblical book at Qumran.

(<https://www.imj.org.il/en/wings/shrine-book/dead-sea-scrolls>)

The most significant is The Great Psalms Scroll, which contains a reordered collection of psalms, including some not found in the MT (e.g., Psalm 151 and a psalm attributed to Ben Sira).

(<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/reading-psalm-superscriptions-through-the-centuries/>)

These scrolls demonstrate fluidity in the canon and order of the Psalms during the Second Temple period and provide important textual variants.

(https://www.museumofthebible.org/dead-sea-scroll-fragments?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=2222320124&gclid=Cj0KCQjwgIXCBhDBARIsAELC9Zh8UpORP0G2c1UpqhRjsyO70go69-f5rszNEOLrRigPGLI0ox6YjVlaAlcrEALw_wcB)

Publication Date

Earliest Composition Dates

The oldest psalms are traditionally attributed to Moses, with Psalm 90 considered the earliest, likely composed around 1500–1400 BCE during the Israelites' wilderness period after the Exodus.

Many psalms are attributed to King David (c. 1000 BCE), Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, and others, reflecting a wide range of historical contexts throughout Israel's monarchy and beyond.

Some psalms, such as Psalm 126, reference the return from the Babylonian exile, dating them to around 537 BCE.

(<https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/3-things-psalms> ,
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/psalms> ,
<https://www.travisagnew.org/2019/03/18/10-things-you-might-not-know-about-the-psalms/>)

Period of Compilation

The Book of Psalms as a collected volume was not compiled all at once. Instead, it evolved over several centuries, with additions reflecting Israel's changing circumstances and worship needs.

The final compilation of the Psalms likely occurred between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE, during or after the Babylonian exile and into the early Second Temple period.

(<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/psalms> ,
<https://www.thecollector.com/historical-context-psalms/>)

First Printed Publication

The earliest known printed edition of the Psalms in the English-speaking world is the Bay Psalm Book, published in 1640 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This was also the first book printed in the English colonies of North America.

(<https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/galleries/belief/item/5572>)

Notable / Best-Known For

Widely Cited For: The Psalms are widely cited for their messianic hope and prophetic anticipation of a future king who will bring justice and peace, themes that are foundational in both Jewish and Christian theology. Their structure and content also mirror the Torah, reinforcing their canonical authority in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

(<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/psalms> ,
<https://religiousaffections.org/articles/biblical-studies/the-foundations-in-the-psalms/> ,
<https://cadamohq.wixsite.com/engagingthetruthteam/post/the-historical-and-cultural-background-of-the-book-of-psalms-part-1>)

Expression of Human Emotion and Worship: The Psalms capture the full spectrum of human experience – joy, sorrow, hope, despair, gratitude, and lament – offering a voice for individuals and communities in every situation. The emotional/spiritual breadth has made the Psalms central to both personal devotion and communal worship in Jewish and Christian traditions.

(<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/psalms> ,

<https://ttb.org/resources/study-guides/psalms-study-guide> ,
<https://cadamohq.wixsite.com/engagingthetruthteam/post/the-historical-and-cultural-background-of-the-book-of-psalms-part-1>)

Legal/Philosophical Principles: The Psalms establish theological insights, such as God's sovereignty, the destiny of the righteous and the wicked, and the call to take refuge in God. These principles are introduced in Psalms 1 and 2 and recur throughout the collection, shaping the moral and spiritual outlook.

(<https://religiousaffections.org/articles/biblical-studies/the-foundations-in-the-psalms/> ,
<https://www.thenivbible.com/blog/key-takeaways-from-psalms/>)

Liturgical/Cultural Impact: The Psalms have profoundly influenced worship practices, serving as the hymnbook of ancient Jerusalem and a central element in early Christian liturgy. Their musical and poetic forms – hymns, laments, and songs of giving thanks – have shaped religious rituals, music, and art for centuries.

(<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/psalms> ,
<https://ttb.org/resources/study-guides/psalms-study-guide> ,
<https://cadamohq.wixsite.com/engagingthetruthteam/post/the-historical-and-cultural-background-of-the-book-of-psalms-part-1>)

Famous Quotes

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." – Psalms, Psalm 23:1 (KJV)

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." – Psalms, Psalm 51:10 (KJV)

"Be still, and know that I am God." – Psalms, Psalm 46:10 (KJV)

Major Works / Textual Contents

Book 1: Psalms 1–41

Primarily psalms of David, focusing on individual prayers of distress, trust, and worship.

Psalm 1 introduces the theme of the righteous versus the wicked.

Psalm 23 is a classic expression of trust in God as shepherd.

Psalm 19 celebrates the glory of God in creation and law.

(<https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-19-03/>)

Book 2: Psalms 42–72

Includes the first set of "sons of Korah" psalms and more Davidic psalms, with a shift toward communal lament and historical reflection.

Psalm 51 (David's prayer of repentance)

Psalm 72 (a royal psalm attributed to Solomon, expressing the ideal of kingship and justice)

Book 3: Psalms 73–89

Dominated by the psalms of Asaph and additional Korah psalms, this book has a darker tone, wrestling with national crisis and questioning God's justice.

Psalm 73 (struggles with the prosperity of the wicked)

Psalm 88 (noted as the bleakest psalm, expressing deep despair)

Psalm 89 (wrestles with the apparent failure of God's covenant with David)

Book 4: Psalms 90–106

Begins with the only psalm attributed to Moses (Psalm 90), emphasizing God's eternal reign and faithfulness before the monarchy.

Psalms 93–100 (the "YHWH reigns" psalms, celebrating God's kingship)

Psalms 103–106 (summaries of God's dealings with Israel before the monarchy)

Book 5: Psalms 107–150

Contains a mix of genres, affirming God's faithfulness to David and Israel, and concludes with five "Hallelujah" psalms (146–150).

Psalm 119 (the longest psalm, an acrostic poem celebrating God's law)

Psalms 120–134 (the "Songs of Ascents," sung by pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem)

Psalm 150 (a final call to universal praise)

Influences / Intellectual Context

Ancient Near Eastern Traditions: The Psalms were shaped by the broader cultural and literary environment of the ancient Near East. They show similarities and contrasts to earlier texts from Ugarit (Canaanite religious poetry) and Babylon. For instance, Psalm 29 shares features with Canaanite hymns, and themes like the leviathan reflect themes found in Babylonian and Canaanite mythology.

Historical and Geographical Context: Most psalms originated in the southern kingdom of Judah and were closely associated with the Temple in Jerusalem, serving as texts for temple worship and ritual life. The Psalms' development spans the early monarchy, the Babylonian exile, and the post-exilic period, reflecting the changing circumstances and faith of the Israelite community.

Intellectual and Theological Movements: The Psalms reflect a dialogue with surrounding polytheistic cultures but consistently affirm Israel's covenantal monotheism. They also predate the introduction of metrical Hebrew poetry, representing a unique form of ancient Hebrew poetic and theological expression.

Legacy and Modern Significance

Interpretation and Application

The Psalms have been central to both Jewish and Christian worship, shaping liturgy, music, and personal devotion for millennia. In Judaism, they are recited in daily prayers, Sabbath services, and festivals, fostering spiritual unity and communal identity. In Christianity, the Psalms are frequently quoted in the New Testament and have been used as a model for prayer and song since the earliest churches.

Historically, the Psalms have also been a resource for understanding the beliefs, values, and experiences of ancient Israel, providing scholars with insights into their society, religious practices, and responses to historical events such as the Babylonian Exile. Their poetic and emotional range has made them a unique window into the spiritual and cultural life of the ancient world.

(<https://biblelift.com/exploring-the-historical-context-of-the-psalms/> ,
<https://cadamohq.wixsite.com/engagingthetruthteam/post/the-historical-and-cultural-background-of-the-book-of-psalms-part-1>)

Ongoing Debates

For centuries, interpreters read the Psalms as a unified book with a messianic message, an approach that dominated until the Enlightenment. The rise of higher criticism in the 18th and 19th centuries led scholars to treat the Psalms as a collection of independent poems, questioning traditional attributions and the unity of the book. This shift sparked debates about authorship, historical context, and canonical structure, with modern scholarship now balancing both literary and historical-critical approaches.

(<https://davidschrock.com/2017/08/25/reading-the-psalms-from-the-beginning-how-reading-the-psalms-canonically-is-more-ancient-than-modern/>)

In contemporary theology and worship, the Psalms continue to be reinterpreted. Some emphasize their role in honest emotional expression and their relevance to modern struggles, advocating for their use in shaping worship that addresses real-world challenges and emotions. Others highlight their political and ethical vision, noting how the Psalms call for justice, defend the oppressed, and critique the abuse of power.

(<https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/3-ways-the-psalms-should-shape-worship> ,
<https://dailytheology.org/2020/08/13/in-you-i-take-refuge-the-political-vision-of-the-psalms-2/>)

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society

2004: "Psalms for Singing – A 21st Century Edition" released by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

(<https://soundcloud.com/connorq/sets/psalms-for-singing-a-21st-1>)

Cambridge Digital Library: Western Medieval Manuscripts – Psalter
Digitized medieval Psalters, including the Moore Psalter, with illustrations and scholarly commentary.

Milken Archive: The Book of Psalms and its Musical Interpretations
Articles and resources on the Psalms' influence in music and liturgy.