PSALMS

The book of Psalms is the largest and perhaps the most widely used book in the Bible. It explores the full range of human experiences in a very personal and practical way. Written over a lengthy period of Israel's history, the tremendous breadth of subject matter in the Psalms includes topics such as jubilation, war, peace, worship, judgment, messianic prophecy, praise, and lament. The Psalms were set to the accompaniment of stringed instruments and served as the temple hymnbook and devotional guide for the Jewish people.

The book of Psalms was gradually collected and came to be known as the *Sepher Tehillim* ("Book of Praises"), because almost every psalm contains some note of praise to God. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) uses the Greek term *Psalmoi* as a title for this book, meaning poems sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments, and this word is the basis for the English terms "psalter" and "psalm."

Author

No other book of the Bible has as many different authors as does Psalms. Seventy-three psalms are attributed to David in the superscriptions, and an additional two, Psalms 2 and 95, are ascribed to David in the New Testament. In addition to the seventy-five by David, twelve are ascribed to Asaph, a priest who headed the service of music. Ten were by the sons of Korah, a guild of singers and composers, and other psalms are ascribed to Solomon, Moses, Heman the Ezrahite, and Ethan the Ezrahite. Fifty of the psalms are anonymous, although some of these are traditionally ascribed to Ezra.

Date

The psalms were originally individual poems. With the passing of time these were collected to form smaller books and the book of Psalms in its present form comprises five of these smaller books. The earliest individual psalm is probably that of Moses (Ps. 90); the latest is probably Psalm 137, which could not have been written before the sixth century B.C. Though many of the psalms were written and collected during the Davidic era, or shortly thereafter, the final compilation of Psalms was probably not complete until the latter half of the fifth century B.C. during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (450–425 B.C.).

Themes and Literary Structure

The Psalter is really five books in one, and each book ends with a doxology. A number of different classification systems for psalm types have been developed, systems often based on the content or life-situation of the individual psalms. It is common to speak of psalms of lament, thanksgiving psalms, enthronement psalms, pilgrimage psalms, royal psalms, wisdom psalms, and imprecatory psalms.

The poetry of the Psalms is unsurpassed. The one characteristic of Hebrew poetry most evident is parallelism, the relationship of one line or verse to another. Four of the most important types of Hebrew parallelism are: (1) **synonymous parallelism**, in which the second line of a couplet repeats the idea of the first line (e.g., 3:1; 24:1); (2) **antithetic parallelism**, where the thought of the second line is contrasted with that of the first line (e.g., 1:6; 90:6); (3) **synthetic parallelism**, in which the second line is a further development of the thought begun in the first line (e.g., 1:1; 19:7); (4) and **emblematic parallelism**, where the second line illustrates the thought of the first line, often by a simile (e.g., 42:1). Nine psalms are alphabetical or **acrostic** (Pss. 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145). In acrostic psalms each successive line or group of lines begins with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The classic example of an acrostic poem is Psalm 119, in which each of the eight verses in a given stanza begins with the same letter.

Psalms at a Glance

BOOK	BOOK I (1–41)	BOOK II (42–72)	BOOK III (73–89)	BOOK IV (90–106)	BOOK V (107–150)
CHIEF AUTHOR	DAVID	DAVID AND KORAH	ASAPH	ANONYMOUS	DAVID AND ANONYMOUS
NUMBER OF PSALMS	41	31	17	17	44
BASIC CONTENT	SONGS OF WORSHIP	HYMNS OF NATIONAL INTEREST		ANTHEMS OF PRAISE	
TOPICAL LIKENESS TO PENTATEUCH	GENESIS: MAN AND CREATION	EXODUS: DELIVERANCE AND REDEMPTION	LEVITICUS: WORSHIP AND SANCTUARY	NUMBERS: WILDERNESS AND WANDERING	DEUTERONOMY: SCRIPTURE AND PRAISE
CLOSING DOXOLOGY	41:13	72:18, 19	89:52	106:48	150:1–6
POSSIBLE COMPILER	DAVID	HEZEKIAH OR JOSIAH		EZRA OR NEHEMIAH	
POSSIBLE DATES OF COMPILATION	c. 1020–970 B.C.	c. 970–610 B.C.		UNTIL c. 430 B.C.	
SPAN OF AUTHORSHIP	ABOUT 1,000 YEARS (c. 1410–430 B.C.)				

OUTLINE OF PSALMS

Book One: Psalms 1–41

1. Two Ways of Life Contrasted
2. Coronation of the Lord's Anointed
3. Victory in the Face of Defeat
4. Evening Prayer for Deliverance
5. Morning Prayer for Guidance
6. Prayer for God's Mercy
7. Wickedness Justly Rewarded
8. God's Glory and Man's Dominion
9. Praise for Victory over Enemies
10. Petition for God's Judgment
11. God Tests the Sons of Men
12. The Pure Words of the Lord
13. The Prayer for God's Answer—Now
14. The Characteristics of the Godless
15. The Characteristics of the Godly
16. Eternal Life for One Who Trusts
17. "Hide Me Under the Shadow of Your Wings"
18. Thanksgiving for Deliverance by God
19. The Works and Words of God
20. Trust Not in Chariots and Horses but in God
21. Triumph of the King
22. Psalm of the Cross
23. Psalm of the Divine Shepherd
24. Psalm of the King of Glory
25. Acrostic Prayer for Instruction
26. "Examine Me, O LORD, and Prove Me"
27. Trust in the Lord and Be Not Afraid
28. Rejoice Because of Answered Prayer
29. The Powerful Voice of God
30. Praise for Dramatic Deliverance
31. "Be of Good Courage"
32. The Blessedness of Forgiveness
33. God Considers All Man's Works
34. Seek the Lord
35. Petition for God's Intervention
36. The Excellent Lovingkindness of God
37. "Rest in the LORD"
38. The Heavy Burden of Sin
39. Know the Measure of Man's Days
40. Delight to Do God's Will
41. The Blessedness of Helping the Poor

Book Two: Psalms 42–72

42. Seek After the Lord
43. "Hope in God!"
44. Prayer for Deliverance by God
45. The Psalm of the Great King
46. "God Is Our Refuge and Strength"
47. The Lord Shall Subdue All Nations
48. The Praise of Mount Zion
49. Riches Cannot Redeem
50. The Lord Shall Judge All People
51. Confession and Forgiveness of Sin
52. The Lord Shall Judge the Deceitful
53. A Portrait of the Godless
54. The Lord Is Our Helper
55. "Cast Your Burden on the LORD"
56. Fears in the Midst of Trials
57. Prayers in the Midst of Perils
58. Wicked Judges Will Be Judged
59. Petition for Deliverance from Violent Men
60. A Prayer for Deliverance of the Nation
61. A Prayer When Overwhelmed
62. Wait for God
63. Thirst for God
64. A Prayer for God's Protection
65. God's Provision Through Nature
66. Remember What God Has Done
67. God Shall Govern the Earth
68. God Is the Father of the Fatherless
69. Petition for God to Draw Near
70. Prayer for the Poor and Needy
71. Prayer for the Aged
72. The Reign of the Messiah

Book Three: Psalms 73–89

73. The Perspective of Eternity
74. Request for God to Remember His Covenant
75. "God Is the Judge"
76. The Glorious Might of God
77. When Overwhelmed, Remember God's Greatness
78. God's Continued Guidance in Spite of Unbelief
79. Avenge the Defilement of Jerusalem
80. Israel's Plea for God's Mercy
81. God's Plea for Israel's Obedience
82. Rebuke of Israel's Unjust Judges
83. Plea for God to Destroy Israel's Enemies
84. The Joy of Dwelling with God
85. Prayer for Revival
86. "Teach Me Your Way, O LORD"
87. Glorious Zion, City of God
88. Crying from Deepest Affliction
89. Claiming God's Promises in Affliction

Book Four: Psalms 90–106

90. "Teach Us to Number Our Days"
91. Abiding in "the Shadow of the Almighty"
92. It Is Good to Praise the Lord
93. The Majesty of God
94. Vengeance Belongs Only to God
95. Call to Worship the Lord
96. Declare the Glory of God
97. Rejoice! The Lord Reigns!
98. Sing a New Song to the Lord
99. "Exalt the LORD Our God"
100. "Serve the LORD with Gladness"
101. Commitments of a Holy Life
102. Prayer of an Overwhelmed Saint
103. Bless the Lord, All You People!
104. Psalm Rehearsing Creation
105. Remember, God Keeps His Promises
106. "We Have Sinned"

Book Five: Psalms 107–150

107. God Satifies the Longing Soul
108. Awake Early and Praise the Lord
109. Song of the Slandered
110. The Coming of the Priest-King-Judge
111. Praise for God's Tender Care
112. The Blessings of Those Who Fear God
113. The Condescending Grace of God
114. In Praise for the Exodus
115. To God Alone Be the Glory
116. Love the Lord for What He Has Done
117. The Praise of All Peoples
118. Better to Trust God than Man
119. An Acrostic in Praise of the Scriptures
120. A Cry in Distress
121. God Is Our Keeper
122. "Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem"
123. Plea for the Mercy of God
124. God Is on Our Side
125. Trust in the Lord and Abide Forever
126. "Sow in Tears ... Reap in Joy"
127. Children Are God's Heritage
128. Blessing on the House of the God-Fearing
129. Plea of the Persecuted
130. "My Soul Waits for the Lord"

131. A Childlike Faith
132. Trust in the God of David
133. Beauty of the Unity of the Brethren
134. Praise the Lord in the Evening
135. God Has Done Great Things!
136. God's Mercy Endures Forever
137. Tears in Exile
138. God Answered My Prayer
139. "Search Me, O God"
140. Preserve Me from Violence
141. "Set a Guard, O LORD, over My Mouth"
142. "No One Cares for My Soul"
143. "Teach Me to Do Your Will"
144. "What Is Man?"
145. Testify to God's Great Acts
146. "Do Not Put Your Trust in Princes"
147. God Heals the Brokenhearted
148. All Creation Praises the Lord
149. "The LORD Takes Pleasure in His People"
150. "Praise the LORD"

Types of Psalms

The book of Psalms is a collection of prayers, poems, and hymns that focus the worshiper's thoughts on God in praise and adoration. Parts of the book were used as a hymnal in the worship services of ancient Israel. The book contains 150 individual psalms, which may be grouped into the following types or categories.

1. **Individual and communal lament psalms,** or prayers for God's deliverance. Psalms of the type are 3–7; 12; 13; 22; 25–28; 35; 38–40; 42–44; 51; 54–57; 59–61; 63; 64; 69–71; 74; 79; 80; 83; 85; 86; 88; 90; 102; 109; 120; 123; 130; and 140–143. These psalms speak to believers in moments of desperation and despair, when our need is for God's deliverance.
2. **Thanksgiving psalms,** consisting of praise to God for His gracious acts. This theme occurs in Psalms 8; 18; 19; 29; 30; 32–34; 36; 40; 41; 66; 103–106; 111; 113; 116; 117; 124; 129; 135; 136; 138; 139; 146–148; and 150. Every prayer we utter should include the element of thanksgiving. These psalms make us aware of God's blessings and lead us to express our thanks with feeling and conviction.
3. **Enthronement psalms,** which describe God's sovereign rule. Psalms of this type are 47; 93; and 96–99. Through these psalms we acknowledge God as powerful Creator and sovereign Lord over all His creation.
4. **Pilgrimage psalms,** which were sung by worshipers as they traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festivals. Pilgrimage psalms are 43; 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; and 120–134. These psalms can help us establish a mood of reverent worship.
5. **Royal psalms,** which portray the reign of the earthly king, as well as of the heavenly King of Israel. This theme is evident in Psalms 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132; and 144. These psalms can make us aware of our daily need to make Christ the sovereign ruler of our lives.
6. **Wisdom psalms,** which instruct the worshiper in the way of wisdom and righteousness. Individual wisdom psalms are 1; 37; and 119. These psalms are especially appropriate in times of decision when we are searching for God's will and direction in our lives.
7. **Imprecatory psalms,** in which the worshiper invokes God's wrath and judgment against his enemies. This theme occurs in Psalms 7; 35; 40; 55; 58; 59; 69; 79; 109; 137; 139; and 144. These psalms can help us be honest about our feelings toward people who have done us wrong and work our way through these feelings to a point of forgiveness.

Images of God in the Psalms	
Images of God as	***Reference in Psalms***
Shield	3:3; 28:7; 119:114
Rock	18:2; 42:9; 95:1
King	5:2; 44:4; 74:12
Shepherd	23:1; 80:1
Judge	7:11
Refuge	46:1; 62:7
Fortress	31:3; 71:3
Avenger	26:1

Creator	8:1, 6
Deliverer	37:39, 40
Healer	30:2
Protector	5:11
Provider	78:23–29
Redeemer	107:2

Messianic Psalms

Many of the psalms specifically anticipate the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, who came centuries later as the promised Messiah. The messianic prophecies in the psalms take a variety of forms and refer to Christ in a variety of ways. (1) *Typical Messianic*. The subject of the psalm is in some respects a type of Christ (see, e.g., Pss. 34:20; 69:4, 9). (2) *Typical Prophetic*. The psalmist uses language to describe his present experience, which points beyond his own life and becomes historically true only in Christ (e.g., Ps. 22). (3) *Indirectly Messianic*. At the time of composition the psalm refers to a king or the house of David in general but awaits final fulfillment in Christ (e.g., Pss. 2; 45; 72). (4) *Purely Prophetic*. Refers solely to Christ without reference to any other son of David (e.g., Ps. 110). (5) *Enthronement*. Anticipates the coming of Yahweh and the consummation of His kingdom, which will be fulfilled in the person of Christ (e.g., Pss. 96–99).

Psalm	Portrayal	Fulfilled
2:7	The Son of God	Matthew 3:17
8:2	Praised by children	Matthew 21:15, 16
8:6	Ruler of all	Hebrews 2:8
16:10	Rises from death	Matthew 28:7
22:1	Forsaken by God	Matthew 27:46
22:7, 8	Derided by enemies	Luke 23:35
22:16	Hands and feet pierced	John 20:27
22:18	Lots cast for clothes	Matthew 27:35, 36
34:20	Bones unbroken	John 19:32, 33, 36
35:11	Accused by false witnesses	Mark 14:57
35:19	Hated without cause	John 15:25
40:7, 8	Delights in God's will	Hebrews 10:7
41:9	Betrayed by a friend	Luke 22:47
45:6	The eternal King	Hebrews 1:8
68:18	Ascends to heaven	Acts 1:9-11
69:9	Zealous for God's house	John 2:17
69:21	Given vinegar and gall	Matthew 27:34
109:4	Prays for enemies	Luke 23:34
109:8	His betrayer replaced	Acts 1:20
110:1	Rules over His enemies	Matthew 22:44
110:4	A priest forever	Hebrews 5:6
118:22	The chief stone of God's building	Matthew 21:42
118:26	Comes in the name of the Lord	Matthew 21:9

[1]

[1]Thomas Nelson Publishers, *Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts : Old and New Testaments.*, Rev. and updated ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1996).

Difficulty of Reading Hebrew Poetry:

The book of Psalms is the only book for which "chapter divisions" may be original (i.e., inspired). Acts 13:33 refers to "the second Psalm" and quotes Psalm 2:7.

Hebrew poetry has other features some of which are difficult, if not impossible, to display in English translation. These include:

1. **Alliteration**: the use of the same or similar sounds at the beginning of verses, or in stressed positions within a verse.
2. **Paronomasia**: a play on the sound and meaning of words.
3. **Acrostic structure**: verses (or sometimes half-verses, or stanzas) begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In Psalms 119, for example, each of the eight verses in the first stanza begins with *Aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The subsequent twenty-one stanzas display the same pattern, employing the remaining letters of the alphabet. In another example, the twenty-two verses in the poem concerning the virtuous woman (Prov 31:10–31) begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
4. **Terseness**: The Hebrew poets said much in few words. The psalms consist for the most part of brief poetic phrases usually containing three Hebrew words, rarely more than four. Conjunctions are often omitted (e.g., Ps 23:1). In the technique of ellipsis the second line of a poetic verse assumes part of what appeared in the first line (e.g., Ps 88:6). Compactness of expression, however, sometimes makes difficult the interpretation of what the poets were trying to say.
5. **Imagery**: The use of imagery is not unique in poetic texts, but is particularly prominent there. Imagery is a concise way of writing because it simultaneously conveys information and evokes an emotional response. Pages of prose texts might be required to explain one simple line of poetic imagery such as "Yahweh is my shepherd." Imagery stimulates imagination.[2]

Additional Difficulties:
Language: compared to Koine Greek, there's far less that we know about Hebrew. It's one thing to read the newspaper; it's another altogether to appreciate Shakespeare. There are many words that we're just not sure about!

TECHNICAL DESIGNATIONS OF PSALMS		
Term	**No. Psalms**	**Suggested Significance**
Mizmor	57	A song sung to the accompaniment of musical (stringed) instruments.
Shir	27	A general term for (vocal?) music.
Maskil	13	A didactic or contemplative poem.
Mikhtam	6	Uncertain. Perhaps a composition intended to record memorable thoughts, pithy sayings, or eloquent refrains.
Tephillah	5	A prayer.
Tehillah	5	A song of praise.
Shiggayon	1	An irregular or wandering song.

(Add to this list: Selah; a musical term denoting silence or a rest)

[2]James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1996).

Imprecatory Psalms.

Imprecatory psalms are those in which the psalmist appeals to God to pour out his wrath upon enemies. Eighteen psalms include imprecatory language of some sort.[37] Of the 368 verses in these psalms, fewer than seventy contain imprecation, most of which are found in three psalms (35, 69, 109). These passages are jarring to the sensitivities of Christians who are taught in the school of Christ to turn the other cheek and pray for enemies.

Why are such violent sentiments expressed in the psalms? Some excuse this material on psychological grounds, i.e., the psalmist was under great stress. Others gloss over them on the grounds that the Old Testament sets forth a lower standard of morality. Others insist that these are inspired accounts of uninspired attitudes and utterances. These passages supposedly represent a low degree of morality or of revelation. Still others argue that David really did not write these psalms of imprecation; they were written during the Maccabean persecution which takes the personal vindictiveness out of these psalms. These explanations, however, ignore (1) the Old Testament condemnation of acts of revenge (Lev 19:18); and (2) the biblical claim that "all Scripture is inspired of God" (2 Tim 3:16).

So what can be said that might help a believer put the imprecatory psalms in proper perspective?

1. The psalmist was zealous to defend the righteousness of God wherever it was attacked or ignored. These are not expressions of a desire for *personal* revenge.

2. The psalmist was deeply concerned about defending God's representative, the king. Any action against this representative was viewed not simply as an act of treason, but as highhanded offense against God himself. Offending God's anointed was equivalent to offending God.

3. The psalmist's harsh cries of judgment were his way of expressing hatred for sin. This is poetry, and poetry tends to exaggerate passions. These exaggerated cries for destruction of sinners emphasize the writer's abhorrence of what God hates as well.

4. Old Testament believers did not have a clear view of judgment after death. Therefore, all judgment must be in this present life. Prior to the cross, the only tangible way in which the truth of God could be demonstrated to human observers was by the pragmatic test of disaster befalling those who were in error, and deliverance being granted to those who held to the truth. The cross was the supreme demonstration of God's displeasure over sin, and the empty tomb was the demonstration of his power over evil. In the light of the cross and the empty tomb the believer today can wait patiently while God's longsuffering permits the wicked to enjoy his temporary success.[38]

5. Most of the imprecatory psalms were written by David, a man who did not possess a vengeful spirit. Frequently the Psalmist prayed for his enemies and tried to save them from their sins (e.g., Ps 35:13; 109:4, 5).

6. Some of the questionable verses actually call for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

7. Imprecations also appear in the New Testament.[39]

8. A harsh sentence does not necessarily imply a hateful spirit.

9. The Hebrew verbs can often be rendered in the future tense as simple prophecies, not wishes—the difference between "Let this happen" and "This will happen." In some instances these questionable verses (cf. 69:25) are quoted in the New Testament as prophecies of the fate of the wicked. Some of the imprecations are in messianic passages in which the language is prophetically put in the mouth of Messiah.

10. The culprits condemned in these passages persisted in sin. They were vicious, blasphemous, blood-thirsty men. The imprecations are against a class of sinners, not individuals. For the sake of the righteous and the advancement of God's kingdom evil must be rooted out.

11. Many of the imprecatory psalms are quoted in the New Testament.[40]

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[37] These psalms contain imprecatory material: 5, 7, 10, 28, 31, 35, 40, 55, 58, 59, 69, 70, 71, 79, 109, 137, 139, 140.

[38] Archer, *op. cit.,* p. 461.

[39] 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8f.; Rev 6:10.

[40] E.g., these passages quote imprecatory psalms: Acts 1:20; Matt 23:38; Rom 11:7–10; John 15:25.

Nelson's Take on Psalms

Many of the psalms can be identified as certain types by their theme:

1. The **royal psalms** emphasize God as King, often using the words "the Lord reigns." These psalms speak of His rule as Creator, as Savior of Israel, and as the Coming One. The royal psalms often point forward to the coming rule of the Savior King, the Lord Jesus.
2. The **psalms of Zion** focus on Jerusalem, using its endearing name Zion. These psalms rhapsodize on the city as God's choice for the site of His holy temple, the place for true worship of His name.
3. The **penitential psalms** are poems in which the poet confesses sin to the Lord, asks for and receives forgiveness, and then praises God for the renewed relationship that God's forgiveness provides.
4. The **wisdom psalms** focus on some of the same issues that are found in the Book of Proverbs. These psalms present sharp contrasts between the righteous and the wicked, address God's blessing and cursing, and often focus on righteous living.
    a. One subcategory of the wisdom psalms is **the Torah psalms**. These are poems that focus on the beauty, truth, and sufficiency of the Law of God.
    b. Two other subcategories of the wisdom psalms are the creation psalms and the history psalms.
        i. In the **creation psalms**, the poet calls for the believer to praise God as the Creator of the universe and the Savior of His people.
        ii. In the **history psalms**, the poet recounts the history of Israel and asks for a renewed commitment to God—even in the face of a history of rebellion.
5. Some of the most troubling psalms are those that contain prayers asking God to curse the wicked. These **imprecatory psalms** are sometimes thought to conflict with the sentiment of the gospel, but in fact they accurately reflect God's abhorrence of evil.
6. In contrast to the imprecatory psalms are the joyful and prophetic **Passover psalms** that became a part of the Passover celebration in Judaism. These psalms are a remarkable celebration of the great acts of the Lord in delivering His people from Egypt, the theme of the Passover celebration. They point forward to the deliverance that would come through the Savior Jesus.
7. A final group of psalms is clustered at the end of the book. These are the **Hallel psalms**, named for the principal Hebrew word for praise, hallel. As their name suggests, these psalms praise God for His character and saving works.

Characteristics of the Psalms

1. First, the psalms were written for singing. These were songs for public worship in the temple of ancient Israel. They are not merely poems, but lyrics for music from the ancient world. As such they contain musical conventions peculiar to music and worship during that time.
2. Second, the poems in the Psalms were written over a period of a thousand years, from the time of Moses in the fifteenth century B.C. to the time of Ezra in the fifth century B.C. Although David is the main author associated with the composition of the Psalms, many other authors from various time periods contributed psalms to what would become the Book of Psalms.
3. Third, the psalms were collected and arranged over a long period of time. This process involved some editorial additions to the poems, some cutting and expanding, and some rearranging and restructuring of various psalms. The Holy Spirit who had inspired these poems in the beginning oversaw this process of restructuring them for temple worship.

4. Fourth, the psalms were written in the language of the human spirit, the utterances of the soul. The psalms are not cool, reasoned prose, but deeply emotional works that use wrenching language, dramatic exaggeration, and figurative speech.
5. Fifth, psalms and the writing of psalms were part of ordinary life for the Israelites. The Scriptures record a number of times when the Israelites spontaneously responded to the Lord with a psalm of praise. Moses sang a psalm in praise of God (Ex. 15); Deborah and Hannah did the same (Judg. 5; 1 Sam. 2); and David blessed the Lord with a psalm (1 Chr. 29). Through a psalm the Israelites would express their devotion and thanks to their Lord. This tradition continued into the New Testament period, for Mary in Luke 1 responded to the angel's message with a psalm (see Rev. 5). This Israelite tradition of psalm writing was confirmed by the discovery of a number of original psalms among the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947.
6. Sixth, individual psalms were written for different purposes. Some began as works of private devotion, while others were designed from the beginning to be used in public worship. Ultimately, all the psalms became the treasure of all the people in temple worship, for no matter what subject they addressed, they always led the people to the worship of the living God.
7. Finally, it must be remembered that the psalms were written in the language of response. Each psalm records in powerful, poetic language one individual's response to God. From a desperate cry to an ecstatic shout of joy, each psalmist responds to God in the middle of a particular situation. Even though the psalms became a part of the community's worship life, they remained a vehicle for individual expression as well. Even today, the psalms are used both in public worship and in the devotional moments of individual Christians.

Hebrew Poetry

A fuller appreciation of the eloquence of the Psalms can be gained by understanding the basics of Hebrew poetry. The lack of a predictable rhythm and rhyme has confused some people about the poetic nature of the Psalms. Although Hebrew poetry contains some rhythm, it primarily makes use of repetition and recapitulation. One line of a verse is followed by another that gives a variation of the same idea. Not only do the psalmists use this poetic technique, but the authors of proverbs use it as well (see the Introduction to Proverbs). The second line of a proverb usually reinforces the meaning of the first line (see Prov. 22:1). This reinforcement of the thought is not mere tautology, but the graceful artistry of a poet. The first line makes a statement that the second line sharpens or heightens.

A psalmist could modify this general pattern in a number of ways. First, the psalmist could use **synonymous parallelism** to make the two elements similar. For example:

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,

And on His law he meditates day and night. (1:2)

Second, the psalmist could contrast the two elements. This type of parallelism, called **antithetical parallelism**, usually contains the word "but." For example:

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,

But the way of the ungodly shall perish. (1:6)

Third, the psalmist could develop the theme of the first line in the second line. This is called **synthetic parallelism**. For example:

Blessed is the man

Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,

Nor stands in the path of sinners,

Nor sits in the seat of the scornful. (1:1)

A fourth improvement on general parallelism is **climactic parallelism**. In this type of parallelism, the first member of a couplet is incomplete and the second member partially repeats the first member and then completes the thought. For example:

Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples,

Give to the LORD glory and strength. (96:7)

Finally, the psalmist could use **emblematic parallelism**. In this type, the first line contains a figure of speech and the following lines explain the figure by expansion or explanation. In the following example, the parallel lines of this verse explain the meaning of the expression "like a tree."

He shall be like a tree

Planted by the rivers of water,

That brings forth its fruit in its season,

Whose leaf also shall not wither;

And whatever he does shall prosper. (1:3)

With poetic parallelism, the Hebrew psalmist powerfully expresses his praise of the Lord. By reading the psalms aloud and emphasizing the parallel elements, one can gain some sense of the harmonious poetic language from which the translation is derived.

Smith's Attempt at Classification

Classification of the psalms is made difficult by the fact that often two very different types of material have been fused into one psalm. The individual psalms are susceptible of diverse interpretation, and this makes uniformity in classification impossible. The tense system of the Hebrew language has a built in ambiguity (so it seems) which makes it difficult at times to decide when a psalm is a prayerful description of present trouble or when it is an enumeration of afflictions now happily past. Sarna sounds this caution: "Any attempt…to effect a systematic generic classification based on a commonality of theme, mood, occasion and style is bound to be more an exercise in convenience than precision." [32]

Though the psalms can be classified in various ways, the following patterns stand out.

1. **Predictive psalms**. Psalms 2, 16, 22, 45, 110, for example, are cited in the New Testament as personally predictive of events in the life of Jesus.
2. **Praise hymns** or hallelujah psalms such as 146–150 extol the wisdom, power and graciousness of God. Hymns are prominent in the Psalter. Some psalms extol God's greatness and providence (e.g., Ps 8, 100), while others extol his sovereignty over the universe (e.g., Pss 47, 96–99). Still others—the so-called Zion songs—praise the city which God had chosen for his habitation.
3. **Petition or supplication psalms** such as 6, 39, 86 pour out the needs of the human heart before God. Sometimes these supplications become psalms of confidence because of the absolute certainty that the prayers contained therein will be answered.
4. **Penitential psalms** such as 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143 confess sin and beg for reinstatement with God.
5. **Perceptive or didactic** or wisdom psalms such as 1, 19, and 119 discuss issues which perplex the human mind.
6. **Profession** or **confession** psalms such as 33, 103 and 107 set forth the psalmists' convictions about the mighty works of God.
7. **Patriotic** or **historic** psalms (e.g., 78, 105, 106) review the history of the relationship between Yahweh and his people.
8. **Pilgrimage** psalms (e.g., 120–134) were sung as worshipers made their way up the hill of Zion to celebrate the great festivals of the Mosaic dispensation.[3]

[32] Sarna, *op. cit.*, 13:1314.

[3] James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1996).