

Psalms

The English title “Psalms” comes from the Greek word *psalmoi*, in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), translated from the Hebrew word *mizmor*, which means “songs to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument.”¹ The texts of the individual psalms do not usually indicate who wrote them. However, some of the titles of the individual psalms do contain information about the writers. Moses wrote Psalm 90. David composed 73 psalms, mostly in the first part of the book (Ps. 1-72). Asaph wrote 12 (Ps. 50, 73-83). Korah’s descendants wrote 10 (Ps. 42, 44-49, 84, 87-88). Solomon wrote Psalm 127 and perhaps 72. Heman the Ezrahite wrote one, Psalm 88. Ethan the Ezrahite composed Psalm 89. The book of Psalms is a collection of psalms from before the monarchy to after the exile. It is not clear when the task of compiling the book of Psalms was completed.

Purpose

The purpose of the book of Psalms is to show that devotion to Yahweh means humans are to bring all of their life and emotions to Yahweh in petition and praise. This is because Yahweh alone is the sovereign king over creation who loves us unconditionally and can handle our petitions and thus is worthy of our praise. Because Yahweh is the relational and sovereign creator, the psalmist is able to surrender his emotions to Yahweh so that He may deal with them in a godly way. It does not matter whether the emotion is positive or negative, godly or ungodly, the psalmist brings all of His emotions to Yahweh and surrenders them before Him. Only Yahweh is able to change the circumstances or the feelings of the psalmist. By surrendering one’s petitions and emotions to Yahweh, one shows trust in and devotion to Yahweh, which is an act of worship.

It is important to understand that the psalms are not meant to always teach correct theology about what one should believe or feel. For example, in Ps. 69:22-28 and 109:6-18 David prays that Yahweh would do horrible things to his opponents for the way they treated him. This is not meant to teach that it is acceptable for a person to desire horrible things to happen to others. Rather, it teaches that people do have those thoughts and feelings and that they are to give them to Yahweh in honest, open, and emotionally vulnerable prayers for Him to deal with. The point is that the feelings one has are real and that it is safe to be vulnerable with Yahweh because He cares about His children. Then He is able to enter the individual’s life, to meet them where they are emotionally, provide them with comfort, enable them to process their thoughts and emotions, and direct them in healing and a correct way of thinking.

Even though the psalms were written by individuals addressing specific issues in their lives, most of the Psalms were not composed for private prayer but for the public and communal worship in the temple.² This is seen in the headings of many of the individual psalms, and there are many psalms that call for the community to join the psalmist in praise (Ps. 24:7-10; 26:6-7; 42; 68:24-27; 109:30; 116:12-14, 17-18; 136). The community of believers would learn and recite these as they entered the temple or celebrated the festivals. It was a way of bringing the community together in emotional surrender to and praise of Yahweh.

¹ See Gerald H. Wilson. *Psalms Volume 1*, p. 21.

² See Gerald H. Wilson. *Psalms Volume 1*, p. 24.

Structure

The book of Psalms is divided into five books (Ps. 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150). These books are marked by the fact that each one ends with the phrase “may Yahweh God of Israel be blessed forever, amen and amen” (Ps. 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:51; 106:48).³

The book of Psalms opens with two introductory psalms (Ps. 1-2) that have no heading. And the book ends with five psalms (Ps. 146-150) that all begin and end with the Hebrew word *halleluyah* (“praise Yahweh”). There is no official structure to the book of Psalms, though many have tried to find one. Thus, there is no argument or progression of thought as the reader makes his or her way through the book. The only semblance of any structure is that there is some chronological progression with the Psalms of David in the first half of the book of Psalms and a clear allusion to captivity toward the close of the book.⁴ Overall, there are more laments than other types in the book of psalms. Most of the psalms in the beginning of the book of Psalms are laments, with more hymns at the end of the book.

Types of Psalms

Though many different types of psalms communicate the prayers, praises, and emotions of the poet, they can all be classified into four major types of psalms. The psalm can be identified by a particular structure. Though the psalm will generally follow the structure laid out below, it might skip different elements or go back and forth between several elements of the structure.

Lament: The purpose of the psalmist is to cry out to Yahweh for deliverance and to call others to do likewise. The focus is on a past or present problem that the psalmist is facing. The structure of a lament is a cry to Yahweh for help, a complaint, a confession of trust, a request, and then a concluding praise. Laments are the majority of the psalms. Examples: Ps. 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 39, 41, 43, 44, 51, 53, 55, 57, 58, 69, 74, 83, 85, 86, 88, 90, 94, 102, 109, 141, 142.

Thanksgiving: The purpose of the psalmist is to praise Yahweh for delivering him or the community from a trial. The focus is on a past problem the psalmist faced and the past deliverance that Yahweh provided. The structure of a thanksgiving is a praise to Yahweh, followed by a report of the problem and deliverance, a thanks, and then a call to others to praise. Examples: Ps. 18, 21, 30, 32, 34, 65, 75, 92, 104, 105, 106, 116, 118, 124, 135, 136, 138, 139.

Hymn (praise): The purpose of the psalmist is to glorify Yahweh by proclaiming who Yahweh is and what He has done. The focus is on a present praise that emphasizes Yahweh’s attributes, character, or deeds. The structure of a praise is a call to praise, followed by a reason for praise, and then a renewed cause for praise. Examples: Ps. 8, 29, 33, 47, 65, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 104, 108, 111, 113, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150.

Royal: The purpose of the psalmist is to focus on Yahweh’s promises in the Davidic covenant to bless and protect the Davidic Dynasty. These psalms focus on three things—the Davidic Covenant, the Davidic dynasty, and the ultimate Davidic king/messiah. Examples: Ps. 2, 21, 72, 110.

³ See Peter C. Craigie and Marvin E. Tate. *Psalms 1-50*, p. 30.

⁴ See Derek Kidner. *Psalms 1-72*, p. 19.

Types of Parallelisms

Hebrew poetry has no clear and consistent use of rhyme, rhythm, or meter that makes it stand out from the prose.⁵ The fundamental characteristic of Hebrew poetry is its way of matching or echoing one thought with another. This is called parallelism, which is when the second line simply reinforces the first, so that its idea is enriched and emphasized. Usually the second part of the sentence will repeat the idea of the first part of the sentence by repeating the same or similar words. In this way the idea of the first part of the sentence is mirrored in the second part of the sentence. This repetition creates a connection between the ideas in the sentence and emphasizes the author's point. Parallelism can be communicated with two parallel lines (couplet) or three parallel lines (triplet).

He rushed through the streets
and flew through alleyways.

She yelled with all her might
and screamed with great intensity.

The nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain.

She is busy at work,
active at school,
and occupied at home.

In Hebrew poetry there are three main types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic parallelism. Note that the psalmists were very creative, and a great number of variations and combinations of these basic types occur in the biblical text.

Synonymous Parallelism: The idea from the first line is repeated with different words in the second line. The couplet or triplet is communicating a singular idea, but each line is just saying it differently with different words in order to emphasize the idea.

My hand will sustain him;
surely my arm will strengthen him. (Ps. 89:21)

I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave. (Ps. 88:5a)

Save me, O Yahweh, from lying lips
and from deceitful tongues. (Ps. 120:2)

On lion and snake you will tread,
you will crush lion-cub and serpent. (Ps. 91:13)

⁵ See Gerald H. Wilson. *Psalms Volume 1*, p. 36.

Wisdom shouts in the street,
she lifts her voice in the square. (Prov. 1:20)

An evildoer listens to wicked lips,
a liar pays attention to a destructive tongue. (Prov. 17:4)

Antithetical Parallelism: An idea is stated in the first line, and then the opposite of that idea is stated in the second line. The couplet is communicating two opposite aspects of the same idea.

The wicked borrow and do not repay,
But the righteous give generously. (Ps. 37:21)

In the morning it glistens and sprouts up;
At evening time it withers and dries up. (Ps. 90:6)

A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish son brings grief to his mother. (Prov. 10:1)

Whoever keeps commandments keeps their life,
but whoever shows contempt for their ways will die. (Prov. 19:6)

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. (Ecc. 7:4)

If he holds back the waters, there is drought;
if he lets them loose, they devastate the land. (Job 12:15)

Synthetic Parallelism: An idea is stated in the first line, and the second line explains it or adds more detail. This is not really parallelism since the following lines are building on the idea of the first line.

Not so with the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away! (Ps. 1:4)

In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Yahweh,
make me dwell in safety. (Ps. 4:8)

He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false,
and does not swear deceitfully. (Ps. 24:4)

The eyes of Yahweh are in every place,
watching the evil and the good. (Prov. 15:3)

O Yahweh, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear? (Hab. 1:2a)

Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are used a lot in poetry to communicate emotion in a more visual and graphic way than simply stating factually how one feels. They also make a point that the author is making more interesting. Or they can help the reader see something from a new perspective.

For example, after a boyfriend and girlfriend break up, one could say, “I am sad,” or “my heart is broken.” The second is more graphic and communicates the emotion in a deeper and more expressive way. Or someone could say, “I have been told that a lot,” or they could say, “if I had a quarter for every time someone has told me that, I would be a millionaire.” Someone could say, “I am hungry,” or “I’m about to starve to death.” None of these statements are literally true, but they better emphasize an emotion to make the author’s point. There are many figures of speech in poetry, but only a few are highlighted here.

Simile (resemblance): A comparison, using *like* or *as*, of two things that have something in common but are still seen as distinct from each other. The author wants to highlight the similarity of the two things. By using *like* or *as*, the speaker makes it clear that the objects are different from each other but have a similar trait.

He is sleeping *like* a baby.

He is fast *as* a gazelle.

He will be *like* a tree planted by streams of water. (Ps. 1:3)

Keep me *as* the apple of your eye. (Ps. 17:8)

When calamity overtakes you *like* a storm. (Ps. 1:27a)

Therefore, be as shrewd *as* snakes and as innocent *as* doves. (Matt. 10:16b)

Metaphor (representation): A comparison between two things where the subject is described as being the other object. The key is the verb “to be” (*is*, *are*), which can be stated directly or implied in the sentence. One thing is said specifically to be the same as another thing, and the distinction between the two things is lost. But because they are known to not literally be the same, it is a metaphor.

My father *was* boiling mad.

The assignment *was* a breeze.

Yahweh *is* my Shepherd. (Ps. 23:1)

But you *are* a shield around me, O Yahweh. (Ps. 3:3a)

Yahweh, my Rock and Redeemer. (Ps. 19:14)

You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? (Matt. 23:33)

Symbolism: When a person, place, or thing is used to represent a moral or spiritual truth. Abstract concepts like love, peace, and hate are ideas that have no physical or concrete existence. Symbolism is used to associate a physical object, like a heart, with an idea, like love, in order to make the idea more concrete to the reader. Peace is symbolized by a dove. Good luck is symbolized by a four-leaf clover.

The rebels raised the *white flag*.

He gave her *red roses* for their anniversary.

In the middle of the garden were the *tree of life* and the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. (Gen. 2:9)

A *star* will come out of Jacob; a *scepter* will rise out of Israel. (Num. 24:17b)

And Yahweh said, “Remove the *filthy garments* from him. Behold, I have taken away your *iniquity*.” (Zech. 3:2-5)

The great *dragon* was hurled down—that ancient *serpent* called the devil. (Rev. 12:9a)

Hyperbole (rhetorical exaggeration): An exaggeration of an idea in order to say more than what is literally meant.

My suitcase weighs a ton.

I am so hungry I could eat a horse.

I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. (Ps. 6:6)

Every one of them could sling stones at a hair and not miss. (Judg. 20:16)

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. (Lk. 14:26)

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. (Matt. 5:29)

Personification: Gives human characteristics or actions to inanimate objects. The non-human objects are portrayed in such a way that we feel they have the ability to act like human beings.

The flowers danced in the gentle breeze.

The fire swallowed the entire forest.

Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares. (Prov. 1:20)

The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. (Isa. 55:12)

The land mourns and the olive oil laments. (Joel 1:10)

Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses. (Rom. 5:14a)

Zoomorphism: Pictures Yahweh or humans with the characteristics of animals, in terms of the appearance or actions of the animal.

She buzzed around the kitchen.

Hide me, O Yahweh, under the shadow of your wings. (Ps. 17:8b)

He mounted the cherubim and flew; He soared on the wings of the wind. (Ps. 18:10)

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. (Ps. 22:6)

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