

How to Read the Psalms



Colonial Baptist Church
Kyle Dunham
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How to Read the Psalms

- Approaching the Psalms from Outside
 - The Five Books of the Psalter
 - Superscriptions
 - Psalm Forms
- Approaching the Psalms from Inside
 - Hebrew Poetry
 - Theological Distinctions

Approaching Psalms from Outside

The Five Books of the Psalter: How is the book of Psalms organized and how does that help us read them?

- Book 1: Psalms 1-41
- Book 2: Psalms 42-72
- Book 3: Psalms 73-89
- Book 4: Psalms 90-106
- Book 5: Psalms 107-150

Approaching Psalms from Outside

The Five Books of the Psalter: Concluding doxologies

- Book 1: Psalms 1-41
 - Concluding doxology: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen." (Ps 41:13 ESV).
- Book 2: Psalms 42-72
 - Concluding doxology: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen!" (Ps 72:18 ESV).
- Book 3: Psalms 73-89
 - Concluding doxology: "Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen." (Ps 89:52 ESV).

Approaching Psalms from Outside

The Five Books of the Psalter: Concluding doxologies

- Book 4: Psalms 90-106
 - Concluding doxology: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, 'Amen!' Praise the LORD!" (Ps 106:48 ESV).
- Book 5: Psalms 107-150
 - Concluding doxology: "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!" (Ps 150:6 ESV).

Approaching Psalms from Outside

The Five Books of the Psalter: Concluding doxologies

- Key doxological terms: *Blessed, LORD, forever (everlasting), Amen*
- Doxological movement: From “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel” to “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!”

Approaching Psalms from Outside

	Bk 1 (1-41)	Bk 2 (42-72)	Bk 3 (73-89)	Bk 4 (90-106)	Bk 5 (107-50)
David	Pss 3-32, 34-41	Pss 51-65, 68-71	Ps 86	Pss 101, 103	Pss 108-10, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138-45
Sons of Korah		Pss 42-49	Pss 84-85, 87-88		
Asaph		Ps 50	Pss 73-83		
Heman			Ps 88		
Ethan			Ps 89		
Moses				Ps 90	
Solomon		Ps 72			Ps 127
Anonymous	Pss 1-2, 33	Pss 66-67		Pss 91-100, 102, 104-6	Pss 107, 111-21, 123, 125-26, 128-30, 132, 134-37, 146-50
Primary / Prominent authors:	David (93%)	Sons of Korah (26%) (first), David (61%)	Asaph (65%) (first)	Moses (6%) (first), Anonymous (82%)	Anonymous (64%), David (36%). Songs of Ascent (120-34)

Approaching Psalms from Outside

	Bk 1 (1-41)	Bk 2 (42-72)	Bk 3 (73-89)	Bk 4 (90-106)	Bk 5 (107-50)
Psalms of Prayer (lament, petition)	19	11	9	4	6
Psalms of Praise	4	6	3	9	14
Psalms of Thanksgiving	5	2	0	1	3
Royal Psalms	4	2	1	1	3
Wisdom and Torah Psalms	3	1	1	0	3
Festival Psalms	2	0	0	2	1
Primary psalm types	Psalms of Prayer	Psalms of Prayer, Psalms of Praise	Psalms of Prayer, Psalms of Praise	Psalms of Praise, Psalms of Prayer	Psalms of Praise

Approaching Psalms from Outside

The Five Books of the Psalter: Authorship & psalm type

- Book 1: Psalms 1-41
 - David is the primary author
 - Highest concentration of Psalms of Prayer (lament, petition)
- Book 2: Psalms 42-72
 - Sons of Korah prominent author(s) (first) along with David
 - Highest concentration of Psalms of Prayer followed by Psalms of Praise
- Book 3: Psalms 73-89
 - Asaph prominent author (first)
 - Highest concentration of Psalms of Prayer followed by Psalms of Praise

Approaching Psalms from Outside

The Five Books of the Psalter: Authorship & psalm type

- Book 4: Psalms 90-106
 - Moses is prominent (first author and referenced seven times in Book 4).
 - Highest concentration of Psalms of Praise (particular focus on the Lord's kingship) followed by Psalms of Prayer.
- Book 5: Psalms 107-50
 - Mostly anonymous psalms with a mini-Davidic collection. Songs of Ascent are prominent.
 - Highest concentration of Psalms of Praise resonating with the climactic conclusion of Pss 146-50.

Approaching Psalms from Outside

The Five Books of the Psalter: Big-picture conclusions

- Psalter authorship movement: From largely Davidic authorship to sons of Korah to Asaph. Then back to Moses (and anonymous) to Anonymous (and Davidic).
- Psalter psalm type movement: From Psalms of Prayer (lament, petition) to Psalms of Praise (cf. Pss 146-50)

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Superscriptions: What do the titles mean?

- Authorship
- Historical context
- Musical style
- Musical instructions
- Musical tunes

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Superscriptions

- Authorship
 - Hebrew term may mean “to,” “by,” or “for.”
 - Best to take the notations as authorship unless there are contrary indications within the psalm.
- Historical context
 - Thirteen psalms include historical information.
 - Comparisons with Hezekiah’s psalm in Isa 38 or Habakkuk’s psalm in Hab 3 indicate these editorial notes quite possibly were composed by the author of the psalm.

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Superscriptions

- Musical style
 - *Song* (*shîr*). Possibly to be sung a cappella as on pilgrimage.
 - *Psalm* (*mizmôr*). Accompanied by musical instrument.
 - *Miktam*. Possibly “inscribed poem” or “silent prayer.”
 - *Maskil*. Possibly “artistic” or “skilled” song.
 - *Shiggaion*. Possibly an “agitated lament.”
 - *[Song of] praise* (*t^hillah*). Song emphasizing praise.
 - *[Song of] prayer* (*t^hfillah*). Song emphasizing lament or petition to the Lord.

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Superscriptions

- Musical instructions
 - *To the choir-master*. In 55 psalms. To the music leader of the Israelite worship.
 - *On the eight-stringed lyre*. A certain type of lyre.
 - *To the maidens* (‘*al alamot*). Probably in the soprano key.
- Musical tunes
 - *Upon gittith*. Possibly an instrument/melody from Gath or upon the winepress (vineyard song?).
 - *According to the lilies*. Probably a musical tune notation.

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Psalm Forms: What are the various types of psalms and how do the types inform our reading?

- Psalms of Prayer (petition or lament)
- Psalms of Praise
- Psalms of Thanksgiving
- Royal Psalms
- Wisdom and Torah Psalms
- Festival/Temple Psalms

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Psalm Forms

- Psalms of Prayer (petition or lament) (see Ps 13)
 - These include prayers of the persecuted or accused, prayers of the sick, communal laments (national crisis), or prayers of repentance.
 - Basic structure:
 - Opening address (usually direct address to the Lord)
 - Description of distress or crisis
 - Plea for help from God often with a motive for aiding
 - Profession of trust
 - Promise to praise God or to offer a sacrifice

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Psalm Forms

- Psalms of Praise (see Ps 117)
 - These include psalms praising the Creator, psalms extolling Zion or the temple, psalms exalting the reign of the Lord.
 - Major themes include creation by God's power, the universality of God's presence and reign, and God's work in Israel's history.
 - Basic structure:
 - Opening invitation to praise
 - Reason for praise (usually introduced by "for" [Hebrew *kî*])
 - Renewed call to praise

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Psalm Forms

- Psalms of Thanksgiving (see Ps 118)
 - These individual or community psalms offer thanks to the Lord for deliverance from some type of distress (e.g., healing from illness, deliverance from enemies, forgiveness of sins).
 - Basic structure:
 - Introduction stating desire to give thanks to the Lord
 - Narrative recounting the hardship, the cry to the Lord, and the Lord's deliverance
 - Conclusion

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Psalm Forms

- Royal Psalms (see Ps 132)
 - These psalms emphasize the themes of kingship, the throne, coronation, royal wedding, or other incidents within the life of the (Davidic) king.
 - Basic features:
 - Reference to the *king*
 - Mention of the *anointed*
 - Reference to *David* or the *Davidic covenant*

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Psalm Forms

- Wisdom or Torah Psalms (see Ps 1)
 - Psalms emphasize wisdom or instruction, the fear of the Lord, the Law, and wisdom terminology (e.g., “how blessed is,” counsel, discipline, discernment, scoffers). Emphasize careful religious instruction for moral and intellectual achievement.
 - Basic components:
 - Use of *wisdom styles*, including proverbs, admonitions, “blessed” formulae, address to sons, better-than sayings.
 - Use of *wisdom themes*, including contrast of righteous vs. wicked, practical advice, and the fear of the Lord.

Approaching Psalms from Outside

Psalm Forms

- Festival/Temple Psalms (see Ps 24)
 - Psalms used for “entrance liturgy” into the worship of the Lord.
 - Basic features:
 - Question concerning whom may enter the temple.
 - An answer stipulating the particular requirements for entrance.
 - A blessing formula for those qualified to enter.

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Approaching Psalms from Inside

Hebrew Poetry: What is Hebrew poetry and how does this color the Psalms?

- Terseness
- Parallelism
- Imagery

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Hebrew Poetry

- Terseness (see Ps 23:1 and 88:6)
 - Terseness describes the *brevity* of the poetic line.
 - Terseness provides *punch* to Hebrew poetry and is best read slowly and thoughtfully to digest its impact.
 - Basic characteristics of terseness:
 - Economy of words
 - Use of parallelism, imagery, and metaphor
 - Lack of definite articles and conjunctions
 - Use of ellipsis (omission)

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Hebrew Poetry

- Parallelism (see Ps 19:2 and 59:1-2)
 - The second line echoes, expands, or intensifies the first line, thus heightening, focusing, specifying, or dramatizing the author's proclamation.
 - Best known way of expressing this: "A is so, and what's more, B is so."
 - The thought of line 1 may be advanced in line 2 (or 3) through the use of synonyms, contrasts, or figures of speech.

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Hebrew Poetry

■ Imagery

- Imagery is using a word picture, language intended to conjure up mental images in the reader by naming a concrete object (such as a *tree* or *house*) or an action (such as *running* or *jumping*).
- Good poetry is effective not by listing “ideas” but by discussing ideas via “things” described using words containing rich imagery.
- The essence of imagery is comparison.
- Two important questions: “What is the literal picture?” and “What does this image evoke?”

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Hebrew Poetry

- Consider the Imagery:
 - ¹When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, ² Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion. ³ The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back. ⁴ The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. ⁵ What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back? ⁶ O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs? ⁷ Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, ⁸ who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water. (Ps 114:1–8 ESV)

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Hebrew Poetry: Prose vs. Poetry

■ Prose

- ²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the LORD threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. ²⁹ But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. ³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses. (Exod 14:26–31 ESV)

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Hebrew Poetry: Prose vs. Poetry

■ Poetry

"I will sing to the LORD,
for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
² The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.
³ The LORD is a man of war;
the LORD is his name.
⁴ "Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea;
his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.
⁵ The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone. (Exod 15:1–5, ESV)

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Theological Distinctions: What are theological emphases in the Psalms?

- The Lord is a faithful, covenant-keeping God
- The Lord is King
- The Lord is a Refuge
- The Lord is Creator

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Theological Distinctions: *The Lord is a faithful, covenant-keeping God.*

- ¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. ² Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. ³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever. (Ps 136:1-3 ESV)

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Theological Distinctions: *The Lord is King.*

- ¹The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. ²Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. (Ps 93:1-2 ESV)

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Theological Distinctions: *The Lord is a Refuge.*

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, ³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.
(Ps 46:1-3 ESV)

Approaching Psalms from Inside

Theological Distinctions: *The Lord is Creator.*

- ¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, ² covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent. ³ He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind. (Ps 104:1-3 ESV)

How to Read the Psalms

Putting It Into Practice: How do I read Psalms this way?

- Position yourself in the book of Psalms.
- Read the title (as available) for authorship and historical context.
- Skim the psalm looking for features or key terms to identify the psalm type.
- Read carefully with sensitivity to the Hebrew poetry.
- Make notes on the theological emphases.
- Allow the psalmist to lead you into worship and prayer to the Lord.