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PSALMS 1–72

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ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles
Amos—Amos
Bar—Baruch
1 Chr—1 Chronicles
2 Chr—2 Chronicles
Col—Colossians
1 Cor—1 Corinthians
2 Cor—2 Corinthians
Dan—Daniel
Deut—Deuteronomy
Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes
Eph—Ephesians
Esth—Esther
Exod—Exodus
Ezek—Ezekiel
Ezra—Ezra
Gal—Galatians
Gen—Genesis
Hab—Habakkuk
Hag—Haggai
Heb—Hebrews
Hos—Hosea
Isa—Isaiah
Jas—James
Jdt—Judith
Jer—Jeremiah
Job—Job
Joel—Joel
John—John
1 John—1 John
2 John—2 John
3 John—3 John
Jonah—Jonah
Josh—Joshua
Jude—Jude
Judg—Judges
1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings
Lam—Lamentations
Lev—Leviticus
Luke—Luke
1 Macc—1 Maccabees
2 Macc—2 Maccabees
Mal—Malachi
Mark—Mark
Matt—Matthew
Mic—Micah
Nah—Nahum
Neh—Nehemiah
Num—Numbers
Obad—Obadiah
1 Pet—1 Peter
2 Pet—2 Peter
Phil—Philippians
Phlm—Philemon
Prov—Proverbs
Ps(s)—Psalms
Rev—Revelation
Rom—Romans
Ruth—Ruth
1 Sam—1 Samuel
2 Sam—2 Samuel
Sir—Sirach
Song—Song of Songs
1 Thess—1 Thessalonians
2 Thess—2 Thessalonians
1 Tim—1 Timothy
2 Tim—2 Timothy
Titus—Titus
Tob—Tobit
Wis—Wisdom
Zech—Zechariah
Zeph—Zephaniah

Psalms 1–72

About the book

The book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter, is really a collection of books, each of which ends with a short doxology or hymn of praise: book 1, Psalms 1–41; book 2, Psalms 42–72; book 3, Psalms 73–89; book 4, Psalms 90–106; and book 5, Psalms 107–50. The book of Psalms itself is composed of even earlier collections. Several psalms, found principally in the first book, are attributed to David. (This may account for the popular but probably not historically accurate tradition that David himself wrote most of the psalms.) Several psalms in the second and third books are ascribed to Korah or Asaph, the two great guilds of temple singers of the Second Temple period (cf. 1 Chr 6:33ff; 25:1-2). The fifth book consists of a number of songs of ascent and psalms of praise known as Hallel or the Hallelujah collection. There are also variations in the preferred name for God. *Yahweh* (rendered LORD), generally used in the first, fourth, and fifth collections, suggests an earlier “Yahwist Psalter,” while *Elohim* (God) is preferred in the second and third books, suggesting an earlier “Elohist Psalter.”

Some psalms include a superscription or an informative statement that precedes the psalm itself. This information might include identification of the earlier collection to which the psalm belonged (e.g., “A psalm of David” [Ps 3] or “A psalm of Asaph” [Ps 82]), liturgical directions (e.g., “For the leader” [Ps 68] or “On stringed instruments” [Ps 55]), lyrical classification (e.g., “A *maskil*” [Ps 54] or “A *miktam*” [Ps 59]), and a purported historical setting (e.g., “for the dedication of the temple” [Ps 30]). This information, which may have little meaning for contemporary readers, was probably included when the psalms were being collected. Since superscriptions are found in the Hebrew text, some English versions begin the numeration of the verses of the psalm with the superscription. The New American Bible Revised Edition follows this custom. Other versions begin the numeration with the first verse of the psalm itself. This explains why there is not always agreement among various translations or versions as to the number of verses in certain psalms.

LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

The psalms are first and foremost lyrical creations, poems that are rich in metaphor and fashioned according to the patterns and techniques of ancient Israelite poetry. One of the most distinctive characteristics of this type of poetry is its parallelism. In this feature, the second half of a poetic line somehow echoes the sense of the first. Thus we read in Psalm 61:

hear	my cry, O God
listen to	my prayer

This poetic technique serves to intensify the point being made.

Another very important feature found in several psalms is the acrostic structure. In this structure the first letter of the first word of successive poetic lines follows the order of the alphabet. The structure is meant to suggest comprehensiveness, similar to the English expression “from A to Z.” Unfortunately, this alphabetic pattern is usually lost when the psalm is translated. However, identification of the acrostic or alphabetic pattern has been retained in Psalms 37, 111, 112, and 119.

A third important feature of the psalms is meter. This is a form of poetic rhythm that is determined by the number of accents in the words that comprise the line of poetry. Since this is a feature of Hebrew poetry, it is also lost in translation.

Finally, a single word, *selah*, is found in several psalms. It is probably an indication of some kind of pause, but it does not always follow the sense of the poem. Many scholars believe that it might have originally functioned as a liturgical or musical directive. However, this is not clear. Nonetheless, it has been retained in the Hebrew and so it does appear in many versions of the Psalter.

Types of psalms

The major classifications of psalms are lament, hymn, prayers of confidence, and prayers of thanksgiving. There are also royal psalms, wisdom poems, historical recitals, ritual or liturgical, and some psalms that might fit more than one classification.

Laments

Nearly a third of all psalms are laments. Some of them are complaints of an individual; others are communal complaints. Laments usually consist of an actual complaint, a plea for deliverance from hardship, an expression of praise of God or confidence that God will intervene and deliver the one(s)

suffering, and a promise to perform an act of devotion in gratitude for God's intervention. Some laments include an acknowledgment of guilt or a claim of innocence. Finally, there is frequently a curse hurled at the one(s) believed to be responsible for the intolerable situation that called forth the lament in the first place. Many people believe that originally the lament included several distinct religious sentiments. The first was the lament or complaint. This was followed by expressions of confidence that God would hear the complaint and remedy the situation. The lament would then end with expressions of gratitude for the divine graciousness of which the psalmist was confident. While traces of all three sentiments can still be found in some laments, the confidence and thanksgiving often comprise individual psalms.

Hymns

The hymn consists of a call to praise God and an account of the wondrous acts of God that elicited the praise. These marvelous divine acts might include glories of creation or the marvelous feats performed in history on behalf of Israel. Hymns praising the Lord's kingship are a distinct group of psalms. Their focus is God's cosmic sovereignty and exclusive reign over all the heavenly bodies. Songs of Zion extol God's holy mountain, the place of God's dwelling on earth, and Jerusalem, the city built on that mountain from which God chose to rule.

Prayers of confidence

Although confidence or trust is often found in laments, the Psalter also contains prayers that focus primarily on such sentiments. The motives for confidence in God's protection and care include divine justice that the people believe will be shown on their behalf, God's faithful commitment to the covenant that God chose to initiate with Israel, and the promises made to Israel's ancestors and renewed from generation to generation. As is the case with laments, there are both individual prayers of confidence and those that are communal in character.

Thanksgiving

Scholars do not agree as to which psalms belong to this category because expressions of confidence and gratitude are often found in laments. Consequently, this type of psalm is usually classified according to its content rather than its form. Thanksgiving psalms are similar to hymns, in that they extol the marvelous works of God. However, hymns call forth praise because of these wonders, while thanksgiving psalms include expressions of gratitude for God's graciousness.

Royal psalms

Some psalms seem to have sprung from various occasions in the life of the king. They are often referred to as “messianic psalms,” since messiah means “anointed one” and kings were anointed. On occasion, they might celebrate the king’s success in battle. However, they usually extol the special covenant relationship that God established with the king and the divine protection bestowed on the Israelite rulers because of it. Royal psalms take on new meaning when they are included in the Christian tradition and are applied to Jesus who is king par excellence and the one uniquely anointed by God. In such instances, it is not that the original psalmist had Christ in mind when composing the poem. Rather, the early Christian community began to view Christ from the perspective of the Davidic ruler and to interpret the psalm from a Christian point of view.

Wisdom poems

Wisdom poems clearly differ from other psalms in both content and style. They call people to listen and to learn, not to pray. Although they do not follow a uniform style, they do possess some distinctive literary characteristics. One such characteristic is the acrostic arrangement in which the alphabet determines the initial letter of the first word of each successive line. This is recognizable only in the original Hebrew. A second characteristic is the recourse made to order in the world of nature. This order is employed as an incentive for establishing social order. One of the most prominent topics of the instruction found in these poems is the theory of retribution: the wise or good will be rewarded with happiness and prosperity while the foolish or wicked will suffer misfortune. Descriptions of situations that illustrate this teaching are intended to exhort people to live life in a way that will lead to happiness.

Various other psalms

The songs of ascent, one of the early collections mentioned above, were probably sung during pilgrimages to or processions around Jerusalem and the temple. A few other psalms appear to have been composed in the style of prophetic speech. Finally, a small number of psalms defy classification. They are either historical recountings of the feats of the Lord, composites of other psalm forms, celebrations of the kingship of the Lord, or liturgical songs.

THE THEOLOGY IN THE PSALMS

The God of Israel

The portrait of God sketched in the psalms draws together all the characterizations of God found in the rest of the Israelite tradition. God is de-

picted as the creator of the universe and the source of all life, victoriously enthroned in heaven, yet dwelling in the city of Jerusalem. Initially believed to be exclusively Israel's liberator, God's reign was ultimately perceived as universal, and all people were invited to worship this God in Jerusalem. The God depicted in the psalms inspires both fear and confidence because of God's breathtaking divine power and majesty as well as the care and protection that God provided for Israel's ancestors in the past. This God demands compliance to the law and yet forgives infraction of it, regardless of the seriousness of the violation. Perhaps the key characterization of the Lord is that of "covenant partner." Fundamental to this understanding of God is the firm conviction that God initiated the covenant, not because Israel in any way deserved it, but because God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Pss 145:8; 103:8).

Humankind

The psalms come from a society in which men are the norm and so the language and imagery reflect this gender bias. Honored as the culmination of creation, humankind is made responsible for all other living creatures. Still, humans live a fleeting life, perishing after a short life span like field flowers. The absence of a clear notion of life after death underscores the starkness of life's impermanence. Though all humans are dependent on God's providence, God seems to be the special guardian of the poor and afflicted, the defenseless widows and orphans.

Natural creation

The psalms reveal a special regard for creation as the handiwork of God's power and ingenuity. Furthermore, Israel reinterpreted many ancient Near Eastern concepts of divinity, arguing that its own God is the one revealed through the elements of nature, in the exquisite design of the natural world, in the power of the thunderstorm, and in the gentleness of refreshing rain. In many psalms creation itself is called on to join in the praise of this wondrous creator-God.

The future

Israel's view of the future, known as eschatology, stems from its faith in the goodness of God toward all creation. Despite the struggles that it faced throughout its history, Israel believed that the final victory would be God's. The psalms say very little about possible life beyond the grave, but they frequently mention the shadowy existence known as Sheol. This netherworld was not a place of reward or punishment, but of darkness, dust, and inactivity. Israel may not have had a clear idea of life after death, but it did not seem to believe that the dead ceased to exist. The people awaited

a final divine victory that would unfold in history, but in a history that included the cosmic realm of the heavens as well.

THE PSALMS TODAY

Contemporary devotion

The psalms continue to play a significant role in the official and private prayer of both the Jewish and Christian communities today. In this way they shape the minds and hearts of modern believers. One result of the various liturgical reforms of the twentieth century is that verses from a particular psalm serve as a response to the first reading. When there is a thematic connection between that first reading and the gospel passage, the responsorial psalm often acts as a prayerful summation of the readings.

Reflective reading of the psalms enables us to immerse ourselves in the religious dispositions of the psalmist. Though the sentiments with which we come to the psalms may not be identical to those expressed in those prayers, we can still recognize the world that they project. At the moment, we may not be living in a world similar to what is depicted there, and our sentiments may not correspond to the sentiments expressed by the psalmist. Most likely, however, there are people somewhere for whom those sentiments accurately express their present situation. Standing in solidarity with those people, we can make our prayer their prayer. In this way our religious consciousness can be profoundly shaped by the psalms.

Troublesome images

The psalms come from worlds that are very different from those of contemporary society. They frequently reflect cultural customs and values that are foreign to us or might even offend our sensitivities. Examples of the first would be ancient patriarchal marriage practices or family customs; an example of the second would be the role that honor and shame play in determining one's social status. In such situations it is important to discover the meaning behind the uncommon expression or figure of speech in order to appreciate its theological message. This can usually be accomplished through an examination of the historical circumstances from which the psalm originated.

There are other aspects of the psalms that many people today find offensive. Examples of these would include the male bias that is apparent in the gender-specific language used, the ethnocentrism that reveals itself in a measure of disdain for nations other than Israel, and the prejudice in presuming that physical disabilities are punishment for sin. These offensive features are not easily overlooked, but careful historical analysis can help

us realize that they are historically and culturally conditioned perspectives that need not be carried into a contemporary point of view.

What is perhaps most troublesome today in many circles is the violence that seems to enjoy divine sanction in so many of the psalms. The psalmists perceive God as a warrior who can be called on to wreak vengeance on the heads of Israel's opponents. God is called on to "crush the heads of his enemies" and then directs the people to "wash your feet in your enemy's blood" (Ps 68:22, 24). Who can comfortably pray: "Blessed the one who seizes your children / and smashes them against the rock" (Ps 137:9)? This kind of characterization of God and these kinds of directives must be carefully interpreted if we are to continue to maintain that they have revelatory value for us today.

Without in any way minimizing what is offensive, we should realize that the psalmists understand the violence that they attributed to God as a form of divine retribution. God was being called on to punish the wicked. When these wicked people were the national enemies of Israel, God was envisioned as a defending warrior, fighting on Israel's side. Since the image of a conquering god was already present in the ancient myths of creation, it is not difficult to see how such an understanding of God might be employed to describe how God acted in Israel's military history.

As is the case with all characterizations of God, the image of the divine warrior is a metaphor, a figure of speech that applies traits of one object to a second and very different object. A metaphor is never a definition, nor does it exactly parallel the two objects being compared. It simply states how these two objects have certain attributes in common. If we are to understand the metaphor of God the warrior, we will have to discover what traits traditionally attributed to the warrior are being applied to God.



Psalms 1–72

First Book—Psalms 1–41

True Happiness in God’s Law

I
1 Blessed is the man who does not
walk
in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the way of sinners,
nor sit in company with scoffers.
2 Rather, the law of the LORD is his
joy;
and on his law he meditates day
and night.

3 He is like a tree
planted near streams of water,
that yields its fruit in season;
Its leaves never wither;
whatever he does prospers.

II
4 But not so are the wicked, not so!
They are like chaff driven by the
wind.

5 Therefore the wicked will not arise
at the judgment,
nor will sinners in the assembly
of the just.

BOOK ONE: PSALMS 1–41

Psalm 1 (wisdom psalm)

1-6 The two ways

The Psalter begins with a wisdom psalm. This suggests that the final editors of the book intended that the Psalter itself be used for instruction, not merely for prayer. The prosperity of the righteous is contrasted with the fate of the wicked. In typical wisdom style, the psalm lays out two divergent ways of life: one leads to happiness, the other to misfortune. The choice is up to the individual. The psalm opens with a macarism, or beatitude (“Happy” or “Blessed”). The righteous flourish because they reject the influence of the wicked and follow the way of the Lord. A metaphor derived from nature characterizes prosperity. Just as a tree thrives on the life-giving properties of nearby water, so those rooted in the law of the Lord bring forth fruit in abundance. The righteous are rooted in the Lord; the wicked are rootless, like worthless chaff. Deprived of life-giving water, they

⁶Because the LORD knows the way
of the just,
but the way of the wicked leads
to ruin.

A Psalm for a Royal Coronation

◀ **2** ¹Why do the nations protest
and the peoples conspire in
vain?
◀ ²Kings on earth rise up
and princes plot together
against the LORD and against his
anointed one:
³“Let us break their shackles
and cast off their chains from us!”
⁴The one enthroned in heaven
laughs;
the Lord derides them,

⁵Then he speaks to them in his
anger,
in his wrath he terrifies them:
⁶“I myself have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.” ▶
⁷I will proclaim the decree of the
LORD,
he said to me, “You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
⁸Ask it of me,
and I will give you the nations
as your inheritance,
and, as your possession, the
ends of the earth.
⁹With an iron rod you will shepherd
them,
like a potter’s vessel you will
shatter them.” ▶

wither and blow away. The way of the righteous is under God’s protection;
the way of the wicked ends in ruin.

Psalm 2 (royal psalm)

The psalm describes the enthronement of a human king by the divine king who sits enthroned in heaven. Psalm 2, which ends with a macarism, is frequently linked with Psalm 1, which opens with that same literary form. This pattern creates a kind of *inclusio* (bookend frame). Together they provide a twofold lens through which the entire Psalter is read. The lens is one of wisdom and messianic expectation (from the Hebrew word *māshîah*, or anointed one).

1-3 Kings of the nations rise up

The relationship between God and the king is clearly drawn. Any kind of rebellion against God or against God’s anointed one is doomed to failure, because the power of God sustains both God’s own dominion and the dominion of God’s chosen king.

4-9 Divine oracle

A divine oracle bestows God’s legitimation on the monarchy and it identifies Jerusalem, also referred to as Zion after the mountain on which

▶ This symbol indicates a cross-reference number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See page 142 for number citations.

¹⁰And now, kings, give heed;
 take warning, judges on earth.
¹¹Serve the LORD with fear;
 exult with trembling,
 Accept correction
 lest he become angry and you
 perish along the way
 when his anger suddenly blazes
 up.
 Blessed are all who take refuge in
 him!

Threatened but Trusting

3 ¹A psalm of David, when he fled
 from his son Absalom.

I
²How many are my foes, LORD!
 How many rise against me!
³How many say of me,
 “There is no salvation for him in
 God.”
Selah
⁴But you, LORD, are a shield around
 me;
 my glory, you keep my head
 high.

II
⁵With my own voice I will call out
 to the LORD,

it was built, as the divinely chosen shrine. The divine decree that establishes the king’s legitimacy reflects the royal covenant that God made with the house of David (cf. 2 Sam 7:14). The notion of the royal covenant is derived from the ancient Near Eastern belief that the king was in some way the son of the god. Hence the father-son relationship. “Today” implies that the king was not always the son of God, but became so, probably at the time of enthronement. (Christians have applied this verse to Jesus and have incorporated it into their Christmas liturgy.) The divine decree also endorses the king’s rule over all other nations. The shepherd metaphor was quite common in the ancient Near East. Kings were often characterized as shepherds with responsibility for the well-being of the people.

10-11 Warning from God

Finally, in the style of a wisdom admonition, the rebelling nations are exhorted to listen and to learn, to serve the Lord lest they perish on their rebellious way. The psalm closes with a macarism (“Blessed are all”).

Psalm 3 (prayer of confidence of an individual)

2-4 Cries of complaint

The psalm opens with one of the standard cries of complaint to God: “How many?” The suffering persists; enemies taunt the psalmist and claim that God is not concerned with the misfortune into which the psalmist has fallen. Despite experiencing derision, the one suffering is confident that God will eventually hear these cries for help and will respond. A military image of a shield characterizes God’s protection that, when it is granted, will enable the psalmist to stand proudly with head held high.

and he will answer me from his
holy mountain.

Selah

⁶I lie down and I fall asleep,
[and] I will wake up, for the
LORD sustains me.

⁷I do not fear, then, thousands of
people
arrayed against me on every
side.

III

⁸Arise, LORD! Save me, my God!
For you strike the cheekbone of
all my foes;
you break the teeth of the wicked.

⁹Salvation is from the LORD!
May your blessing be upon your
people!

Selah

Trust in God

4 ¹For the leader; with stringed
instruments. A psalm of David.

I

²Answer me when I call, my saving
God.
When troubles hem me in, set
me free;
take pity on me, hear my prayer.

5-7 Confidence in God

God’s “holy mountain” can be a reference either to a sacred mountain on which God dwells or to the temple where God is found in the midst of the Israelites. Because God has answered prayers in the past, the psalmist is confident that God will answer again. With God as protector, the psalmist claims to have nothing to fear from human attacks.

8-9 Cry for help

A final cry for help arises out of extreme distress. Violent means may be necessary to defend the psalmist. The parallel construction demonstrates the character of the reprisals the psalmist suggests that God may have to take:

shatter the jaws	of all my foes
break the teeth	of the wicked

This construction also shows how the psalmist’s foes are likened to the wicked. When deliverance finally does come, it will not be as the result of military might, but as a gift graciously given by the Lord.

Psalm 4 (prayer of confidence of an individual)

2 Cries for help

The psalm opens with a threefold petition: “Answer me . . . take pity . . . hear. . . .” The multiple nature of this petition underscores the urgency