

A Taste of the Psalms I

Psalms 1–8

Overview of Hebrew poetry; introduction to Psalms; types of psalms—prayers, laments, thanksgivings, imprecations, hymns, royal/messianic, sanctuary.

Overview of Hebrew poetry

- **Much Old Testament scripture is poetic**
 - The Book of Psalms, obviously
 - Other parts of the *Ketuvim* or “Writings,” such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon
 - Much of the Latter Prophets
 - Even passages in the *Torah* such as Jacob’s Blessing (Genesis 49), Moses Song (Exodus 15), David’s Lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1)
- **What is poetry?**
 - **Concentrated language**
 - Maximum of thought in a minimum of words
 - **Creative and evocative use of language**
 - Different diction (word choice), use of words to mean more than usual
 - Unusual syntactical structure
 - Distinctive in both **form** and **content** (more below)
- **Effects of Poetry**
 - Requires the reader to slow down, think about and interpret the material
 - Stirs deep feelings, emotional and spiritual

Formal Features of Hebrew Poetry

Structure of Individual Psalms

- *Much of the formal or “shape” of OT poetry is not evident in translation*
- **Line level**
 - **Alliteration** (repetition of initial consonants sounds in a line), **paronomasia** (verbal puns on similar sounding words), **rhythm or patterns of stress** (but not necessarily meter)
- **“Verse” level**
 - Most English verses consist of a **couplet** (bicolon) or sometimes a **triplet** (tricolon)
 - This is seen in some extent in translation, especially in study Bibles (in the KJV look for the colon (:))
 - Bicola and tricola are important for **parallelism**, and important content feature of OT poetry
- **Stanza (or strophe) level**
 - Group of couplets that constitute a sense unit, equivalent to a paragraph or pericope
- **Poem level**
 - Sometimes a scheme binds together an entire Psalm
 - Notable is the **acrostic**, where each verse begins with a certain letter
 - Psalms 34 and 119

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Content Features of Hebrew Poetry

Literary Features of Psalms

- **Compression**—large amount of thought into the least number of words
- **Creative and evocative use of language**
- **Parallelism**—correspondence in the ideas expressed in two or more successive lines
 - **Synonymous parallelism** (sense of A-line repeated in B-line)
 - *Why do the heathen rage,*
and the people imagine a vain thing? (Ps. 2:1)
 - **Antithetical parallelism** (sense of A-line contrasted in B-line)
 - *For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous:*
but the way of the ungodly shall perish (Ps. 1:6)
 - **Synthetic or climactic parallelism** (sense of A-line built upon in B-line)
 - *Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty,*
give unto the LORD glory and strength. (Ps. 29:1)
 - *I glory in plainness,*
I glory in truth
I glory in my Jesus
for he hath redeemed my soul from hell (2 Nephi 33:6)
- **Parallelism is important because, unlike rhythm and meter, figures of thought can be translated into another language!**

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Musical Features of Hebrew Poetry

- **No ancient biblical music has survived**
 - David played on the harp as he sang . . .
 - **Selah**—enigmatic Hebrew term that may have been a musical direction
- In the post-biblical period scripture was frequently chanted, and system of marking the biblical text, called *cantillation*, developed to divide it into units, indicate stress or accent, and indicate musical line



"And God said, "Let the waters be collected." (Gen 1:9) Vowel points in red, cantillations in green; *public domain image courtesy of the ever-popular Wikipedia!*

- Audio clip: *Psalm 18:1–5 chanted* (Yehezkel Hai El-Beg)

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Introduction to Psalms

- **Title**
 - Hebrew: *Tehillim* or "songs of praise"
 - Greek: *Psalm*
- **"Torah is revelation, prophecy is proclamation, psalms are response" (Bandstra)**
 - The Psalms reflect the feeling and religious experience of ancient Israel
- **Many are pre-exilic, some even original with David**
 - Nevertheless, some are post-exilic and all bear evidence of editing during the collection process
- **Structure**
 - 150 psalms divided into 5 "books" on analogy to the Torah
 - Each books ends with a **doxology or statement of praise** (41, 72, 89, 106, 150)
- **Attributions**
 - David (73), Solomon (2), Sons of Korah (12), Asaph (12), Heman (1), Moses (1), Ethan (1)

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Psalm Collections

- In addition to the five-fold formal division of the final edition, the Psalter can also be divided into a number of Psalms grouped by types
 - some of them, focusing on the use of *YHWH* or *Elohim* divine names, might suggest that some Psalms came from the south (J) and some from the north (3)
- Psalm Subcollections (see Bandstra, 418, table 14.1)
 - Yahwistic Psalms of David (3–41)
 - Psalms of Korah (42–49)
 - Elohist Psalms of David (51–72)
 - Psalms of Asaph (73–83)
 - Psalms on YHWH's kingship (93–99)
 - Hallelujah Thanksgiving Psalms (111–118)
 - **Songs of Ascents** (liturgical psalms for entry to the temple, 120–134)
 - Hallelujah Thanksgiving Psalms (146–150)

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Psalm Types

- **Complaint**
 - The largest number of Psalms are actually lamentations, describing the suffering of the singer and containing pleas for deliverance
 - E.g. Psalm 22:2–3
- **Penitential**
 - Prays for forgiveness and help
- **Trust**
- **Thanksgiving**
 - Express gratitude for divine intervention to the singer
- **Hymn**
 - Descriptive language to praise a characteristic of God (irrespective of what he has done for the singer)
- **Torah Psalms**
 - Praise God's revelation in Torah
 - E.g. Psalm 119:1–2
- **Wisdom**
 - Cf. Proverbs
- **Royal Psalms**
 - Praising a king as the representative of YHWH, sung at important events (coronation/adoption, weddings, victories)
 - For Christians the king was supposed to be a type of the coming Messiah, hence many serve double-duty as **Messianic Psalms**
- **Temple and Liturgy**
 - Describe the joys of the temple, prepare worshippers
- **Imprecations (cursings!)**
 - Display God's justice, prove God's authority over the wicked, lead wicked to repentance (*HCSB*)
 - "God hears even outrageous cries for justice and attends human suffering" (Bandstra, 410)

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First Taste of Psalms, 1–8

- Psalm 1
 - A Torah psalm with features of wisdom literature (like Proverbs)
- Psalm 2
 - A **royal psalm** with strong **Messianic applications**
 - ⁶Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. ⁷I will declare the decree: **the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.** ⁸Ask of me, and I shall give *thee* the heathen *for* thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth *for* thy possession."
- Psalms 3 and 5
 - individual **lament or complaint psalms**
- Psalms 6–7
 - **penitential** and **imprecatory psalms**
- Psalm 8
 - A **hymn of praise** with a passage in vv. 5–6 that, although referring to Adam/humanity can have **messianic application**
 - "O LORD our Lord, **how excellent is thy name in all the earth!** who hast set thy glory above the heavens. . . . ³When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained"
 - ⁵For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. **⁶Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet**