

Resource: Study Notes - Book Intros (Tyndale)

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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PSA

Psalms

Psalms

Jesus and the apostles loved the book of Psalms—they quoted from it and lived out of it. These ancient prayers and praises of Israel provide a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament; the themes introduced in the psalms find further development in the New Testament. Where David's dynasty failed, Jesus gives hope. Yet, certain expectations that emerge in the book of Psalms still remain for the future, namely that God's people will completely fulfill his purposes and that all nations will submit to the Messiah.

Summary

The psalms, like all Scripture, are inspired and given by God (see [2 Tim 3:16](#)). Yet each psalm originated with a human author as a prayer or praise to the Lord. The psalms are diverse: The Psalter includes laments, praise psalms, wisdom, thanksgiving, reflections on God's actions, celebrations of God's revelation, and worship.

The first two psalms serve as an introduction to the entire Psalter (the book of Psalms). [Psalm 1](#) describes a godly person who delights in God, lives by divine instruction, and is not influenced by evildoers. [Psalm 1](#) points to three questions: (1) Is there forgiveness for sins? (2) Why do the godly suffer? and (3) Why do the wicked prosper? The rest of the Psalter meditates on these questions.

[Psalm 2](#) speaks of how the nations and the wicked are in rebellion against God's rule. God judges the rebellious and protects the godly. [Psalm 2](#) suggests two questions: (1) Why do the rebellious nations and the wicked prosper? and (2) Why were the kings of David's line not victorious?

The psalmists largely wrestle with these questions. Some quietly accept their problems, while others question God or become exasperated. Meanwhile, new questions and issues develop out of their dialogues with God.

The Composition of the Psalms

For a thousand years, poets wrote these poems while people recited and collected them. The Temple liturgy encouraged both the writing and the collection of psalms. Gradually, editors incorporated smaller collections into larger collections, shaping five collections into the one book of Psalms. The process of editing the Psalter into one book took place over time and was completed following the exile to Babylon. There are several markers of this editorial activity:

1. The editors placed [Psalms 1](#) and [2](#) as an introduction to the whole book of Psalms. Both psalms give idealized portraits: [Psalm 1](#) portrays the ideal godly person who lives by God's instruction. [Psalm 2](#) portrays the Messiah, the ideal king of Israel. The rest of the Psalter develops and deepens these portraits, while at the same time exploring how neither the people of God nor their king were able to fulfill God's ideals and bring about the happiness and peace of God's kingdom.
2. Individual psalms were collected in groups. The editors arranged these groupings of psalms into five collections: Book One ([Pss 1-41](#), with a doxology in [41:13](#)), Book Two ([Pss 42-72](#), with a doxology in [72:19](#)), Book Three ([Pss 73-89](#), with a doxology in [89:52](#)), Book Four ([Pss 90-106](#), with a doxology in [106:48](#)), and Book Five ([Pss 107-150](#), without a doxology).

3. Books One ([Pss 1–41](#)) and Two ([Pss 42–72](#)) form the first stage of the collection. The shift from David in Book One ([Pss 3–32](#); [34–41](#)) to collections of psalms by various authors in Book Two (the descendants of Korah, [Pss 42–49](#); Asaph, [Ps 50](#); David, [Pss 51–65](#); [68–70](#); Solomon, [Ps 72](#)) reveals a thematic transition from David as the sole model and teacher to other perspectives. At the end of Book Two, the editor comments, “This ends the prayers of David son of Jesse” ([72:20](#)). This comment remained in place even when Books Three, Four, and Five (with additional psalms of David) were added to the collection.
4. Book Three ([Pss 73–89](#)) shares with Book Two its preference of the name *Elohim* for God ([Pss 42–83](#)) and its diversity of authors (Asaph, [Pss 73–83](#); the descendants of Korah, [Pss 84–85](#); [87–88](#); David, [Ps 86](#)). [Psalm 73](#), which opens Book Three, questions God’s justice and power, thus calling into doubt the magnificent vision of the messianic kingdom outlined in the final psalm of Book Two ([Ps 72](#)). This questioning returns in [Psalm 89](#), at the close of Book Three.
5. The psalms of Book Four ([Pss 90–106](#)) wrestle with questions raised at the time of the Exile, when it seemed that God’s covenant with David had been dissolved (see [Ps 89](#)). In response to this crisis, several psalms encourage individual growth in character and godliness (see [Pss 91–92](#)). Most psalms in this collection present God as the true and faithful king whose kingdom extends to every part of creation ([Pss 93–100](#)). He still loves his people, the flock of his pasture ([Ps 100](#)), but they have to listen to him ([Pss 95](#); [100](#)). God is the source of forgiveness, and his compassion assures his exiled people that he still cares for them. The review of redemption history from creation to the Exile ([Pss 104–106](#)) underscores both God’s wisdom and Israel’s folly as a framework for understanding the Exile.
6. The benediction of [Psalm 106:48](#) is also included in [1 Chronicles 16:36](#) and might indicate that Book Four was completed in the postexilic era (when Chronicles was compiled).

7. Book Five ([Pss 107–150](#)) includes a number of smaller collections: the *Egyptian Hallel* ([Pss 113–118](#)); the *Torah Psalm* ([Ps 119](#)); the *Great Hallel* ([Pss 120–136](#)), which includes the *Songs of Ascents* ([Pss 120–134](#)); eight psalms of David ([Pss 138–145](#)); and five concluding hymns of praise ([Pss 146–150](#)). Book Five sets out the thematic progression of affliction, lament, God’s rescue, and praise. The opening psalm ([Ps 107](#)) begins this pattern, and its final verse ([107:43](#)) points to the importance of wisdom in discerning God’s ways. [Psalm 119](#), the longest psalm, celebrates the wisdom of God and the word of God. The psalms recounting the Lord’s historic care for Israel in the wilderness ([Pss 114–118; 135–136](#)) prepare exilic and postexilic Israel to read David’s final prayers ([Pss 138–145](#)) in a new light: David looked forward to God’s kingdom ([Ps 145](#)). The psalms of praise affirm this hope ([Pss 146–150](#)).
8. Additions appear to have been made to already-existing psalms. This may explain the prayer for the restoration of Zion ([51:18–19](#)) and for God’s blessing on Jerusalem ([69:34–36](#)). Changes in circumstances may have occasioned the addition of new stanzas.
9. The available manuscripts reveal some flexibility in the organization and titles of the psalms. Both the Hebrew and Greek editions of the Psalter contain 150 psalms, but with differing divisions and numbering as well as differences regarding which psalms have titles. The Greek text combines both [Psalms 9](#) and [10](#) and [Psalms 114](#) and [115](#) into one psalm each, but it splits both [Psalms 116](#) and [147](#) into two. Differences between the Hebrew and English numbering are indicated in the notes.

By the time of Jesus, the collected Psalter was well known (see [Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20](#)). It was part of

the third section of the Hebrew canon, called the Writings (see [Luke 24:44](#)).

Authorship

Many of the psalms are associated with David, but not all; in fact, less than half are explicitly connected with him. Others are connected with Asaph ([Pss 50; 73–83](#)), the descendants of Korah ([Pss 42–49; 84–85; 87](#)), Solomon ([Pss 72; 127](#)), Heman ([Ps 88](#)), Ethan ([Ps 89](#)), and Moses ([Ps 90](#)).

Of the 116 psalms with a title, most identify a person who is linked to that psalm. The person named may be the author, but not necessarily. The Hebrew preposition *le* before the name (often translated “of”) can also mean “for,” “dedicated to,” “concerning,” “to,” or “by.” So, *ledavid* (often translated “of David”) could be interpreted as “for David,” “dedicated to David,” “concerning David,” or “by David.” While many psalms “of David” may have been written by him, there are several reasons for caution. The titles occasionally have two names, such as David and Jeduthun or Asaph ([Pss 39, 62, 77](#)). It is possible that the other individual was the actual author of the psalm. Furthermore, the psalms whose titles connect them with an episode of David’s life ([Pss 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142](#)) provide little or no specific connection with those episodes. For example, the title in [Psalm 51](#) connects the psalm with David’s sin and Nathan’s rebuke. The psalm speaks of sin, forgiveness, and a broken spirit, but any specifics of the situation are notoriously absent. In addition, several psalms “of David” seem to assume the existence of the Temple, which was not constructed until after David’s death (see [Ps 5:7; 122:title; 138:2](#)). Similarly, the title of [Psalm 30](#) connects David with the dedication of the Temple, and [Psalm 69](#) does not seem to fit with what is known of David’s life. Finally, some textual traditions vary in the mention of David in the heading (e.g., [Pss 122, 124](#)). It is possible, therefore, that *ledavid* should be understood in many cases as meaning “for/dedicated to/concerning David” rather than “by David.” Such psalms evoke his persona as the chief representative of the dynasty without implying that he himself was the author. Still, there are many psalms that could have been authored by David.

Literary Issues

The title *Psalms* comes from the Greek word *psalmos* (“song”; see [Luke 20:42; 24:44](#)), which translates the Hebrew *mizmor*, a word frequently

found in the titles of individual psalms (e.g., see [Ps 3:title](#), translated “psalm”). The word *mizmor* is related to a verb meaning “to play a stringed instrument.” The psalms were originally accompanied by instruments and were part of the oral tradition of Israel before they were collected. The Hebrew title of the Psalter is *tehillim* (“praises”), a word that is related to *hallelujah* (“praise Yahweh”).

Psalm Titles. The psalm titles, or short superscriptions accompanying most of the psalms, give information such as the author, the type of psalm (e.g., song, prayer), a musical notation, the use of the psalm, a historical context, or a dedication. Much of the information is not well understood, so many scholars do not emphasize the psalm titles in the interpretation of the psalms.

In Hebrew editions, the psalm titles are typically numbered as verse 1. As a result, the verse numbers for many entire psalms differ by one from most English translations.

Interlude (Hebrew *Selah*). This word is found throughout the book of Psalms. The meaning of the word is uncertain, though it is probably a musical or literary term. In the NLT it is consistently rendered *Interlude*.

Groupings of the Psalms. The psalms can be grouped in a number of ways:

- By the names they use for God: Yahweh (“the Lord,” [Pss 1-41](#)) and Elohim (“God,” [Pss 42-72](#)).
- By the names in the titles: David ([Pss 3-32](#); [34:1-41:13](#), etc.), the descendants of Korah ([Pss 42-49](#); [84:1-85:13](#); [87:1-88:18](#)), and Asaph ([Pss 50, 73-83](#)).
- By genre (see below).
- By the collections of which they are already a part: e.g., the *Songs of Ascents* ([Pss 120-134](#)). Other collections were recognized in Jewish tradition, such as the *Egyptian Hallel* ([Pss 113-118](#)) and the *hallelujah* hymns ([Pss 146-150](#)).
- By thematic connections: e.g., God’s kingship ([Pss 93-100](#)), or the storyline from creation to the Exile ([Pss 104-106](#)).

Genres of the Psalms. The psalm titles often designate the genre of a psalm. The most frequent genre designation in the titles is the Hebrew term *mizmor*, referring to a song originally accompanied by stringed instruments. Less frequent are the words *maskil* (meaning “psalm” or “chant”: [Pss 32; 42; 44-45; 52-55; 74; 88-89](#)), *miktam* (“psalm” or “chant”: [Pss 16; 56-60](#)), *shir* (“song”: [Pss 45; 120-135](#)), *shiggayon* (“psalm,” a generic or musical term: [Ps 7](#)), *tepillah* (“prayer”: [Pss 17; 86; 90](#)), *tehillah* (“psalm of praise”: [Ps 145](#)), *higgayon* (“meditation,” meaning unknown: [Ps 9:16](#)), and *todah* (“psalm of thanksgiving”: [Ps 100](#)).

In addition to the genre identifications that are found in the Hebrew text, the psalms may be divided into three main categories:

1. Wisdom or instructional psalms ([Pss 1, 15, 24, 33, 34, 37, 73, 90, 107](#))
2. Psalms of lament (most psalms in books 1—3), which can be subdivided into individual laments and community laments
3. Hymns of praise or thanksgiving ([Pss 8, 19, 29, 65, 67, 114](#)), which can similarly be divided into individual and community hymns

The psalms of praise include several subgenres, including “royal” psalms about the king ([Pss 2, 45, 72, 89, 110](#)); psalms ascribing kingship to the Lord ([Pss 93, 95–99](#)); hymns about creation ([Pss 19, 29, 104](#)); and hymns about Zion ([Pss 46, 48, 84, 87](#)).

Another way of reading the psalms is based on the movement in many psalms from instruction to a problem and from a problem to a renewal in commitment and character. The Psalter as a collection of five books is largely instructional in nature. It is “instruction” (torah; see [1:2](#)) and has the purpose of teaching God’s people how to live.

The Psalms in Israel’s Worship

The book of Psalms contains much information on music making in ancient Israel. The majority of psalms are songs of praise, thanksgiving, prayer, and repentance. Some of the psalms were used on specific occasions, such as at Passover ([Pss 113–118](#), or when journeying to Jerusalem for the annual festivals ([Pss 120–134](#)). There are also historic odes that relate great national events (for example, [Ps 30](#), “a song for the dedication of the Temple,” and [Ps 137](#), which portrays the sufferings of the Jews in captivity). Such psalms played a role in the life of the community; however, the exact nature of that role is uncertain.

Meaning and Message

The psalms provide windows into the souls of the ancient saints who wrote them. Their theological reflections are not easy or simple-minded, but the psalmists’ faith, when tried, is purified.

The psalms model depth of character, wisdom, honesty, and authenticity. But the prayers in the Psalter are more than models to be imitated. They are God’s instructions for righteous living, part of his torah (“instruction”; see [Pss 1; 19; 119](#)). God teaches who he is, what he has done, and what he expects from his people. The psalms are God-centered, instructing his people to discern error in themselves, to receive his correction, and to be like him. They also encourage God’s people to worship him vibrantly and to bear witness about him to the world.

The psalmists reflected on the transitory nature of life, on suffering, and on the many kinds of adversity that human beings experience. As the psalmists faced alienation and pain, they longed for God’s presence, provision, and protection (e.g., [Ps 23](#)), and for a lasting glory. Even the psalms connected with David often reveal a humble rather

than a victorious David—humiliated rather than glorious. The psalmists experienced alienation and shame, and they longed for redemption, trusting in the Lord to vindicate them.

The Psalter illustrates the failures of Israel and of David’s dynasty. The best of the godly Israelites and kings were unable to bring the happiness and peace that [Psalms 1](#) and [2](#) speak of (see also [Ps 72](#)). The psalms are thus God’s exhortation to each person to cultivate wisdom, to trust in him, to live by grace, and to have hope in the one who can bring blessings to a needy world.

The psalms prepare God’s people for the coming of Jesus Christ as the perfect human and ideal king, the descendant of David who has absolute integrity. Jesus and the apostles understood Jesus’ life and ministry in light of the psalms (see [Matt 13:34–35; 21:16, 42; 23:39; John 2:17; 15:25; 19:24, 28, 36; Acts 2:22–35; 4:11; 13:32–38; Rom 15:3; 1 Cor 15:25–27; Eph 4:7–10; 1 Pet 2:7](#)). Jesus entered the world of humans and lived out the patterns found in the psalms, including humiliation, suffering, death, vindication, and glory. He is the only human being who has completely pleased God ([Ps 1](#)). He is the Messiah and King ([Ps 2](#)) who has become our means of redemption, happiness, and peace.