

## Psalms

Write down the number of your favorite (or one of your favorite) Psalms here, and why it's among your favorites.

Is there a particular Psalm you dislike or which makes you feel uneasy? If so, write down the number here and tell us why?

### Introduction

The Psalms of the Old Testament are technically classified as Wisdom literature, along with works like Ecclesiastes and Job, but they are truly in a class by themselves. Among the most ancient of all the scriptures, we cannot reliably date them. Some were written during the period of monarchy (~1,000 – 800 B.C.), while others were composed during the Babylonian Exile (700's B.C.). Like all aspects of scripture, many more Psalms were composed than were included within the canon of scripture, and while many were attributed to David or Solomon and some might have been composed by them, we do not know who specifically produced these beautiful hymns of praise and petition.

The Psalms have been an important part of worship for both the Jewish and Christian communities since their inception. This central role in worship has also made the Psalms a key theological resource, articulating an almost comprehensive synopsis of who we understand God to be. As the community changed, so did its needs, and hence, the Psalms have served many purposes. As their use in ritual settings declined after the destruction of the Temples, the Psalms became a mainstay of synagogue instruction. Once the monarchy foundered, Psalms pertaining to the king were increasingly interpreted as references to the Messiah. Indeed, the early Church found ample prophetic passages in the Psalms to help them better understand the nature of Christ and to legitimize their claims that he is the long-awaited Messiah. Only Isaiah is quoted more frequently in the New Testament.

The Psalms also serve as a synopsis of the Torah, the Law that guided ancient Israel in its covenant with God. Some Psalms are entirely devoted to instruction, including recitation of key acts in salvation history, especially the Exodus. Monks aspire to memorize this collection, and every office in the Book of Common Prayer contains at least a portion of a Psalm.

Perhaps most relevant is how the Psalms speak to us by speaking for us. In them, we experience the entire range of human emotion, from elation to despair. The Psalms are the voice of a people who share an intimately personal relationship with a God who hears and answers prayer.

Psalms are poems. In Hebrew, they usually rhyme. They are designed to be sung, and include a primitive form of musical notation. As poetry, the Psalms are meant to be interpreted with sensitive imagination, more so than most other biblical texts. The Psalms describe and reveal, yet they serve as a vessel meant to transport the worshipper to spiritual destinations.

The Psalms are loosely structured, with several collections sown together in an elusive order that subtly shifts from prayer to praise as the anthology unfolds. A number of the Psalms (101 out of 150) have a heading that indicate the most appropriate occasion for the Psalm to be used, or more often, the group to whom composition has been attributed, such as the Korahites (responsible for Psalm 50 and 73 – 83) and the Asaphites (responsible for Psalm 42 – 49, 84 – 85, and 87-88). These were two groups of Temple musicians mentioned in II Chronicles 20:19 and I Chronicles 16:7.

Their contribution consists of Psalms with a corporate purpose, while Psalms 3 – 41 and 51- 72 are blocks either dedicated or attributed to David, which are more like individual prayers offered up to God. Psalms 120 – 134 are an anthology devoted to pilgrimage, while the final 15 Psalms are highly doxological in tone. Among the most prominent instructional Psalms are 1, 37, 49, 78, and 112. More numerous than any of the others are a type of Psalm known as laments, which bewail the hard conditions of life and seek God's help, always confident in both God's ability and desire to do so. Other Psalms, like the first two which serve as an introduction to the whole collection, are used to connect these various chunks together. In all, there are five identifiable sections to the collection, marked by doxological conclusion in Psalms 41, 72, 86, 106, and 150.