

Patterns of Praise

An Introduction to the Psalms

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Introduction

Background and Foreground

The *Psalms* are the collection of 150 songs of Israel into five “books.” King David composed at least half of these songs. The psalms originate in basic, familiar life-situations. The various forms taken by these songs—*laments*, *thanksgivings*, *hymns*—are common in ANE *lyric poems*. The psalms challenge believers to reflect on their deepest feelings, longings, and commitments.

Collections

The Psalms are the collection of 150 songs of Israel into five “books.”

Book One	1-41
Book Two	42-72
Book Three	73-89
Book Four	90-106
Book Five	107-150

David, Solomon, Asaph, and others assembled the psalms into various collections to address the liturgical needs of the gathered assembly. Within the five larger collections or books, smaller collections can be distinguished, hinting at their earlier, independent use in the public assemblies of Israel.

In its final form, the Book of Psalms begins with two introductory psalms (Psalms 1, 2). The first two books (Psalms 1-41; 42-72) are all attributed to David—except Psalm 72, which is attributed to Solomon. Book two begins with Psalm 42: “As the deer pants... so my soul pants for You, God.” Book four begins with the Psalm of Moses (Psalm 90). Books four and five emphasize community worship (compare the *Hallel* psalms and the Psalms of Ascent, 120-134). In the last five psalms (146-150) the Books of Psalms comes to a climax and crescendo, with each psalm beginning with the call to “Praise the Lord!”

Composition

King David composed at least half of these songs.

The psalms are songs composed by David and others for public worship. These musicians were like their modern counterparts, working over a period of time with their lyrics and composition. For the psalms, the process of composing may have begun in the wilderness, with David making informal notes of his thoughts and feelings. Work continued; refinements were made. Finally, to address the liturgical needs of the public assembly, David and others turned these early notes into final, formal compositions.

These compositions display a kingdom perspective. David and the kings that followed him (the “Davidic Kings”) were aware of their unique place in the line of a coming Messiah: they were *types* of the coming King. About ten psalms are obviously *Messianic* (e.g., Psalms 22, 110). But the label *Messianic* can be misleading if restricted to ten psalms. Many other psalms were composed with a Messianic and Kingdom perspective.¹

Settings

The psalms originate in basic, familiar life-situations.

Form follows function—that is what they teach designers and engineers. Consider homes and the functions of their doors, windows, living rooms, and bathrooms. The form a particular house takes arises from those functions—without restricting the creativity of the designer or the ability of others to appreciate that design. The psalms also have set functions that give rise to a general form—without interfering with the creative expression of their authors.

The settings for the psalms are familiar. True worshippers can identify with both their later and early settings. The *later settings* refer to the liturgical needs that prompted a psalm’s final composition: Sabbaths, festivals, coronations, weddings, victory celebrations, times of distress, and other times of public worship. The *early settings* refer to the stories that often inspired these formal compositions.

Forms

The various forms taken by these songs—*laments, thanksgivings, hymns*—are common in ANE lyric poems.

Patterns emerge when you read the Psalms. Complaints and cries give way to declarations and shouts of praise. God seems far away, the sinner feels abandoned (insignificant, vulnerable, overwhelmed with despair), the enemy is near; God acts, the overwhelmed find comfort; the enemy flees. These patterns have influenced the way people have classified the psalms. Sometimes they are grouped according to *content*; sometimes according to the standard *literary forms* of the Ancient Near East. The best method types the psalms according to both form and content—keeping the two separate.

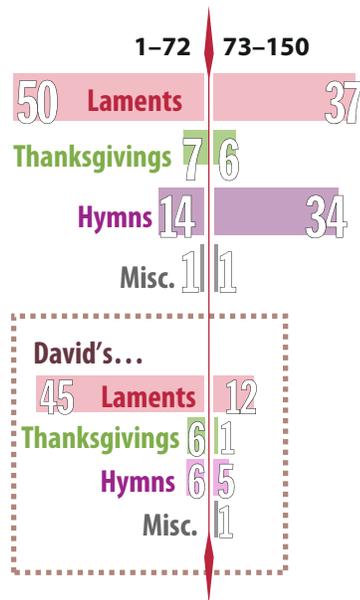
The literary forms found in the psalms are common in other Ancient Near Eastern *lyric poems* (short poems, sung with the accompaniment of a lyre). As part of a culture’s wisdom tradition, these songs encourage reflection. The various forms do not have a rigid structure and need not be complicated. They take into consideration the life-situations in which they were composed.

Laments The word *lament* refers to the expression of grief or sorrow. Arising from these situations, a typical psalm of lament has four elements: (1) cry of desperation, (2) trust, (3) petition, and (4) vow to praise.

Thanksgivings The thanksgiving psalms are the fulfillments of vows made to publicly thank God when deliverance occurred. Because they were composed to publicly declare *what God has done*, these are often called psalms of *declarative praise* or psalms of *narrative praise*. A typical psalm of thanksgiving has three elements: (1) call to praise, (2) story of deliverance, and (3) concluding praise.

¹ See John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, Allenson-SCM Press, 1975.

Hymns Laments and thanksgivings are composed around stories of what God has done. Though connected to those stories, *hymns* move to a deeper level. Describing what the psalmist has *come to know about God*, hymns call the true worshipper to respond with an ever-greater devotion. Because hymns are descriptive expressions, in song, of *who God is*, they are often called *descriptive psalms of praise*. A typical hymnic psalm has three elements: (1) a general call to praise, (2) the praise itself, and (3) a final call to praise.



The Distribution of the Psalms The classifications of psalms are flexible and dependent upon knowledge of their original life setting. Use this graph and its percentages only to visualize the approximate distribution of the basic types of psalms, classified by their form.

These graphs show the distribution of all psalms vs. those of David (top and bottom) and the distribution of those in the first half of the psalms vs. the second half (left and right).

A list of all psalms for a particular type (lament, thanksgiving, or hymn) occurs on the first or second page of each of the following three chapters.

Approach

The psalms challenge believers to reflect on their deepest feelings, longings, and commitments.

As a part of wisdom literature and as lyric poetry,² the psalms challenge us to reflect. The poet T. S. Eliot tells us, “Poetry is not an assertion of truth, but the making of that truth more fully real...”

The poet concentrates emotional and psychological experience into each line of a poem. The poet uses language in a skillful way, to evoke feelings from words, sounds, and thoughts. The primary desire of the poet is to stimulate the imagination and evoke feelings. To this end, the poet uses rich, earthy, and sensual metaphors, as well as literary devices like acrostics, parallelism, and repetition.

The reader of poetry is challenged to relive the poet’s experience. The psalms invite the believer into the experience of genuine relationship with God.

² See *Bib Sac*, “The Hermeneutics of Biblical Lyric Poetry.”

Additional Reading

For introductory studies, the following works will be stimulating and helpful.

Eaton, John H. *Kingship and the Psalms*, Allenson-SCM Press, 1975.

Kidner, Derek *Psalms 1-150: An Introduction and Commentary* (2 vols.: 1-72, 73-150), Tyndale-IVP, 1973.

Westermann, Claus (translated by Ralph D. Gehrke) *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, Augsburg, 1980.

Laments

Trust during times of trouble

The psalms of lament are those songs of the individual (IL) and the community (CL) that encourage trust in God during times of trouble. They make up over half of all the Psalms and three quarters of those written by David (indicated by red in the list below¹). This explains why individual laments stand out in the first two books of the Psalms: the majority of David's psalms occur there.

Individual Laments			Community Laments		
Books 1-2		Books 3-5	Books 1-2		Books 3-5
H?	2	+H 36	73	44	74
	3	38	77	60	79
	4	39	86		80
	5	40	88		82
	6	41	89		83
	7	42	91		85
	9	43	101		90
	10	51	102		94
	11	52	109		106
	12	53	120		108
	13	54	121		115
	14	55	130		123
	15	56	131		125
	16	57	132		126
	17	58	+IT 138		129
+H	19	59	139		137
	20	61	140		
	22	62	141		
	23	63	142		
	25	64	143		
	26	? 67	144		
	27	69			
	28	70			
+IT	31	71			
	35	72			

Psalms of David in red. Mixed psalms marked with (+). Uncertain classifications marked with (?).

¹ Psalms specifically attributed to David (highlighted red in the charts that follow) include: Psalm 2 (compare Acts 4:25); Psalms 3-32, 34-41 (Psalm 10 was originally part of Psalm 9; Psalm 33 is attributed to David in the LXX); Psalms 51-65, 68-70; 86, 95 (compare Hebrews 4:7), 101, 103; Psalms 108-110; Psalms 122, 124, 131, 133; Psalms 138-145. This makes a total of 76.

Setting

In the laments, troubled souls, feeling abandoned by God, turn to God. *External threats* figure in the early setting of the laments, but it is the *internal stresses* of God's people that shape and inspire their composition. They do not desire protection from what *might* occur; they seek deliverance from what has *already* occurred or is *now* occurring: general feelings of abandonment; specific feelings of insignificance, vulnerability, and overwhelming despair.

Cast

There are three main characters in psalms of lament: the "I" or "we" of the individual or community, the "they" of the enemies, and the "you" of God. God's people cry out to God for help in times of trouble.

The individual or the community A small number of psalms arise in circumstances of national disaster. But most of the laments concern the individual, and this individual is usually the king—most often King David. The historical books of Samuel and Chronicles present an intimate look at the life of the person who wrote and influenced the majority of the psalms. In thirteen cases superscriptions record the historical circumstances of David's life that occasioned the psalm. In the remaining psalms, the reader can enter into the setting by calling to mind what they know about David's life.

Enemies The enemies of God's people find their way into almost every lament. If they are not in the foreground, they are in the background. They cause trouble and wait to exploit it. The enemies are not given names—but we know them: the *unrighteous*, *wicked*, and *foolish* (compare Psalm 14). They are national enemies, insincere friends, relatives, and rivals.

God He cares. He hears. In mercy, He turns to the cry of the desperate. He is worthy of trust and praise. What is it for God to deliver?

Typical Structure

Psalm 3 is a psalm of lament that illustrates each of the typical elements:

Cry of desperation

Psalm 3.1-2

"O Lord how my adversaries have increased!
Many are rising up against me.
Many are saying of my soul,
"There is no deliverance for him in God." *Selah*

Trust A choice is made to trust.²

Psalm 3.3-6

But you, O Lord, are a shield about me;
my glory, and the One who lifts my head.
I was crying to the Lord with my voice,
and He answered me from His holy mountain. *Selah*
I lay down and slept;
I awoke, for the Lord sustains me.
I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people
who have set themselves against me round about.

² The laments of the community recount God's past deeds.

Petition Specific petitions are made. Reasons are included for why God should answer. These reasons often refer back to the nature of the lament, the expressions of trust, repentance, or innocence.

Psalm 3.7

Arise, O Lord;
 Save me, O my God!
 For
 You have smitten [or, *smite*] all my enemies on the cheek;
 You have shattered [or, *shatter*] the teeth of the wicked.

Sometimes, especially in the individual lament, God’s reassurance is felt. For example Psalm 6.8-10: “Away from me, all you who do evil, for the Lord has heard my prayer...” (compare Psalm 28.6). In Psalm 60.6-8 the words God has spoken through a prophet or priest are included, but this is rare. The psalmist often includes a lesson learned.

The laments remind us to pray with a kingdom perspective, like Jesus taught us in the “Lord’s Prayer.” Only those living for the kingdom will have the experiences that occasion genuine petition.

Praise The one who was desperate, moves forth, confident the story will end in praise. Generally, the psalm records the commitment or vow that was made to praise God when the deliverance comes, “I will praise you....” At other times, as in Psalm 3, the psalmist expresses the praise within the psalm.

Psalm 3.8

Salvation belongs to the Lord;
 Your blessing be [or, *is*] upon Your people. *Selah*

The psalms of lament remind us to evaluate what we desire. Do we want the circumstances to change, or do the hard times awaken a desire to know God better? That desire is expressed in desperate cries for help, choices to trust, specific petitions, and confidence that trials will end in praise.

Laments that focus on a particular theme

Imprecation The enemy comes to the forefront in the petition. Elements of imprecation can be seen in many psalms (compare Psalms 35, 69, 83, 109—even 3). But Psalm 137 is the most vivid example.

Psalm 137.8-9

O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one,
 how blessed will be
 the one who repays you
 with the recompense
 with which you have repaid us.
 How blessed will be
 the one
 who seizes and dashes
 your little ones against the rock.

Confidence Trust in God becomes the main theme. For example, see Psalms 16, 23. Readers are often drawn to the expressions of confidence in these psalms. But, they must remember that the context of trouble and lament is still present.

Trust during times of trouble

Psalm 16.1-2

Preserve me, O God,
for I take refuge in You.
I said to the LORD,
“You are my Lord; I have no good besides You.”

Repentance These include six of the seven *penitential psalms* (Psalm 32 is an IT): Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143; compare also Psalms 3, 15, 25, 39, 90, 106. The psalmist laments the consequences of his sin—especially the use the enemy may make of it: “Many are saying of my soul, ‘*There is no deliverance for him in God.*’” (Psalm 3.2). Compare Psalms 6 and 38.

Psalm 6.1-3

O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger,
nor chasten [or, *discipline*] me in Your wrath.
Be gracious to me, O Lord,
for I *am* pining away;
heal me, O Lord,
for my bones are dismayed.
And my soul is greatly dismayed;
but You, O Lord—how long?

Psalm 38.1-4

O Lord, rebuke me not in Your wrath,
and chasten me not in Your burning anger.
For Your arrows have sunk deep into me,
and Your hand has pressed down on me.
There is no soundness in my flesh
because of Your indignation;
there is no health in my bones
because of my sin.
For my iniquities are gone over my head;
as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me.

Innocence The psalmist relates to God and, unlike the enemy, can freely declare his personal innocence. He knows God will reassure. Psalm 26 illustrates this (compare also Psalm 7, 15, 24).

Psalm 26.1-7

Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.
Examine me, O Lord, and try me;
test my mind and my heart.
For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes,
and I have walked in Your truth.
I do not sit with deceitful men,
nor will I go with pretenders.
I hate the assembly of evildoers,
and I will not sit with the wicked.
I shall wash my hands in innocence,
and I will go about Your altar, O Lord,
That I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving
and declare all Your wonders.

Prayer The typical elements are assumed, but the petition is highlighted. The prayer may be for victory, protection, deliverance, intervention, or blessing. Compare the request for blessing in Psalm 20.

Psalm 20.1-5

May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
 May the name of the God of Jacob set you securely on high!
 May He send you help from the sanctuary
 and support you from Zion!
 May He remember all your meal offerings
 and find your burnt offering acceptable! *Selah*.
 May He grant you your heart's desire
 and fulfill all your counsel!
 We will sing for joy over your victory,
 and in the name of our God we will set up our banners.
 May the Lord fulfill all your petitions.

Wisdom The psalm has all the elements present in wisdom literature. These are *wisdom laments*: the lesson learned comes in the context of trouble. Psalm 14 presents a clear example (compare Psalms 52, 53—even Psalm 37 from the perspective of old age).

Psalm 14.1-3

The fool has said in his heart,
 "There is no God."
 They are corrupt,
 they have committed abominable deeds;
 there is no one who does good.
 The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men
 to see if there are any
 who understand,
 who seek after God.
 They have all turned aside,
 together they have become corrupt;
 there is no one who does good,
 not even one.

The laments remind us that God works to build wisdom and character during trials, not after they end.

Thanksgivings

Gratitude after experiences of deliverance

Psalms of thanksgiving express the gratitude of the individual (IT) and the community (CT) for God's deliverance. They make up less than one tenth of the psalms. However, *thanksgivings* occur within *laments* (compare Psalm 40.1-11) and many laments end on a note of gratitude. Unlike the laments and hymns, thanksgivings are uniformly distributed in the Psalms. However, more individual thanksgivings occur in the first half where David's psalms are also concentrated.

Individual Thanksgivings		Community Thanksgivings	
Books 1-2	Books 3-5	Books 1-2	Books 3-5
18	+H 92	? 50	75
21	116	65	? 81
30	118		? 95
32	? 138		107
34			124
66			

Psalms of David in red. Mixed psalms marked with (+). Uncertain classifications marked with (?).

Setting

The term *thanksgiving* has a specific meaning when used of these psalms. More than a general “thank you God,” the songs praise God for *what He has done*. The setting is specific: deliverance, defeated enemies, fulfilled vows, and public celebration.

Deliverance The drama began in a time of trouble; the story was told in a lament. The drama continues; God’s saving actions have now brought about a *reversal* of the extreme predicament.

Defeated enemies The enemy was a major figure in the laments. But now, since the enemy has been defeated, he plays a minor role.

Fulfilled vows The pledge made to praise God when delivered is now fulfilled. God responded; the psalmist now does the same. At the earliest opportunity he brings his praise before the public assembly. Psalm 66 illustrates.

Psalm 66.13-20

I shall come into Your house with burnt offerings;
I shall pay You my vows,
which my lips uttered
and my mouth spoke
when I was in distress.
I shall offer to You burnt offerings of fat beasts,
with the smoke of rams;
I shall make *an offering of bulls* with male goats. Selah.
Come *and* hear, all who fear God,
and I will tell of what He has done for my soul.
I cried to Him with my mouth,
and He was extolled with my tongue.
If I regard wickedness in my heart,
the Lord will not hear;
but certainly God has heard;
He has given heed to the voice of my prayer.
Blessed be God,
who has not turned away
my prayer
nor His lovingkindness
from me.

Public celebration Psalm 66 (above) also illustrates the setting of public worship. Although thanksgivings originated during specific historical settings, they were formally designed for the public presentation of a *thank offering* (compare Leviticus 7). Occasions for this offering included the three annual festivals and other public assemblies. Compare the beginning of Psalm 34. It concerns the rescue of David when he feigned insanity before Abimelech.

Psalm 34.1-4

I will bless the Lord at all times;
His praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul will make its boast in the Lord;
the humble will hear it and rejoice.
O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt His name together.
I sought the Lord, and He answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.

David moves from despair to a festive meal, shared with God, family, and friends. Compare Psalm 22.

Psalm 22.25-26

From You *comes* my praise in the great assembly;
 I shall pay my vows before those who fear Him.
 The afflicted will eat and be satisfied;
 those who seek Him will praise the Lord.
 Let your heart live forever!

Typical Structure

Psalm 30 shows the typical elements of a psalm of thanksgiving. As in the laments, these elements arise from the original setting of the psalm. Unlike the laments, the structure more often follows the typical pattern.

Call to praise Thanksgivings begin with a *summons* to fulfill the vow made in the lament. In fact, the conclusions of many laments match introductions to thanksgivings. A *summary* of God's deliverance may follow.

Psalm 30.1-3

I will extol You, O Lord,
 for You have lifted **me** up,
 and have not let my enemies rejoice over **me**.
 O Lord my God,
 I cried to You for help,
 and You healed **me**.
 O Lord,
 You have brought up **my** soul from Sheol;
 You have kept **me** alive, that I would not go down to the pit.

An *invitation*, perhaps in a separate, later stanza, follows the summons and summary. The community is called to join in praise—even when the deliverance has concerned an individual. The benefits apply to all. Notice how the “**I**” in the summons and summary changes to plural “**you**” in the invitation.

Psalm 30.4-5

Sing praise to the Lord, **you** His godly ones,
 and give thanks to His holy name.
 for His anger is but for a moment,
 His favor is for a lifetime;
 Weeping may last for the night,
 but a shout of joy *comes* in the morning.

The thanksgivings teach us to fulfill our vows. An ungrateful heart fails to acknowledge God's deliverance. A genuine vow comes from a renewed commitment to God and a desire to praise Him before the community.

Story of deliverance God's act of deliverance is declared and narrated (therefore the names *psalms of declarative praise* and *psalms of narrative praise*). The story includes two elements: First, a review of the original crisis.

Psalm 30.6-7

Now as for me, I said in my prosperity [or, *security*],
 “I will never be moved.”
 O Lord, by Your favor [cf. NIV, *when you favored me*]
 You have made my mountain to stand strong;

Gratitude after experiences of deliverance

[or, *But when*] You hid Your face,
I was dismayed.

Second, an account of the rescue, with this pattern: “I cried... You heard... You acted...”

Psalm 30.8-12a

To You, O Lord, I called,
and to the Lord I made supplication:
“What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise You? Will it declare Your faithfulness?
Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me;
O Lord, be my helper.”
You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness,
that *my* soul may sing praise to You and not be silent.

The thanksgivings teach us tell others our stories, to spontaneously express gratitude for what God has done for us and the community. Review the crisis: it seemed like there was no hope. Put it in perspective: you cried out, God heard, He acted.

Concluding praise This part of the song takes different forms. Sometimes the commitment is made to praise God for His deliverance—a vow that God will not be forgotten.

Psalm 30.12b

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever.

The praise may turn descriptive—a hymn describing who God is. A lesson learned may be emphasized. This may be an extended section. In Psalm 30 a lesson occurs in v. 5.

Psalm 30.5

...for His anger is but for a moment,
His favor is for a lifetime;
weeping may last for the night,
but a shout of joy *comes* in the morning.

God is eager to deliver. We can learn a lesson from our experience and share that lesson with others.

Thanksgivings that focus on a particular theme

Worship The true worshipper grows in wisdom during times of trouble. Psalm 34 begins with the typical elements of a thanksgiving, but the lesson learned becomes the main focus.

Psalm 34.8-22

O taste and see that the Lord is good;
how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!
O fear the Lord, you His saints;
for to those who fear Him there is no want.
The young lions do lack and suffer hunger;
but they who seek the Lord shall not be in want of any good thing.
Come, you children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

Who is the man who desires life
 and loves *length of days* that he may see good?
 Keep your tongue from evil
 and your lips from speaking deceit.
 Depart from evil and do good;
 seek peace and pursue it.

The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous
 and His ears are *open* to their cry.
 The face of the Lord is against evildoers,
 to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

The righteous cry, and the Lord hears
 and delivers them out of all their troubles.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
 and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
 but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

He keeps all his bones,
 not one of them is broken.

Evil shall slay the wicked,
 and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.

The Lord redeems the soul of His servants,
 and none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.

Victory Some psalms of thanksgiving focus on deliverance in military battle. Victory psalms are seen in other parts of Scripture, for example the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). The Philistines sang a victory song (Judges 16.23-24) just before Samson brought down the temple on their heads!

Psalms 20 and 21 form a pair: Psalm 20 is an individual lament, before the battle; Psalm 21 is an individual thanksgiving of victory, after it (compare Psalms 118.15-16, 149). Psalm 18 reflects this form. The dramatic entrance of God (vv. 7-15) is typical of these psalms (compare Psalm 68.7-8). Because of God, the enemies are defeated.

Psalm 18.37-42

I pursued my enemies and overtook them,
 and I did not turn back until they were consumed.
 I shattered them, so that they were not able to rise;
 they fell under my feet.
 For You have girded me with strength for battle;
 You have subdued under me those who rose up against me.
 You have also made my enemies turn their backs to me,
 and I destroyed those who hated me.
 They cried for help, but there was none to save,
even to the Lord, but He did not answer them.
 Then I beat them fine as the dust before the wind;
 I emptied them out as the mire of the streets.

Hymns

Reasons for Praising God

The *hymns*¹ build on the lessons that were expressed in the laments and thanksgivings. They move to a deeper level, describing what the psalmist has *come to know about God*, about *who God is*. They are *descriptive* psalms of praise. In the hymns, a psalmist presents reasons for praising God, reasons that center on His *majesty* and *mercy*. The hymns make up the second greatest number of psalms—about one third of the total. The majority of the hymns occur in the last half of the Psalms.

Hymns ²			Other Psalms ³	
Books 1-2	Books 3-5		Books 1-2	Books 3-5
1	76	112	? 45	? 110
? 2	78	113		
8	81	114		
+ 19	84	117		
24	87	+LT 119		
29	93	122		
33	95	127		
37	96	128		
? 45	97	133		
46	98	134		
47	99	135		
48	100	136		
49	103	145		
50	104	146		
67	105	147		
68	? 106	148		
? 72	? 110	149		
	111	150		

Psalms of David in red. Mixed psalms marked with (+). Uncertain classifications marked with (?).

¹ Since all psalms are hymns, the term *hymn* can be misleading.

² Some hymns are typically called *wisdom psalms*.

³ Psalms 45 and 110 are either unique forms, or they might still be thought of as hymns. Psalm 45 is a royal wedding song—but it praises God. Psalm 110 is a royal coronation song. Like Psalm 2, it may be an individual lament, reflecting the trouble of the enemies, or a hymn, reflecting the mercy of God to His king.

Setting

As with the other forms, hymns originate within a specific setting.

Absence of crisis Though in mind, no immediate crisis prompts the hymn. There are periods in life that allow us to focus on what have learned about God.

Personal encounter Picture David. One night he stands under the stars meditating on Israel's history, his life, and the character of God. He talks to God. Psalm 8 presents the formal record of this encounter.

Psalm 8.1-9

FOR THE CHOIR DIRECTOR; ON THE GITTITH. A PSALM OF DAVID.

O LORD, our Lord,
 How majestic is Your name in all the earth,
 Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!
 From the mouth of infants and nursing babes
 You have established strength
 Because of Your adversaries,
 To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.
 When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
 The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;
 What is man that You take thought of him,
 And the son of man that You care for him?
 Yet You have made him a little lower than God,
 And You crown him with glory and majesty!
 You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
 You have put all things under his feet,
 All sheep and oxen,
 And also the beasts of the field,
 The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,
 Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.
 O LORD, our Lord,
 How majestic is Your name in all the earth!

Hymns center on two aspects of God's character: *majesty* and *mercy*. God is great; God is good. For example, consider how these aspects are developed in Psalms 33, 135, and 136.

	Psalm	33	135	136
God is Majestic...				
over creation		6-9	6-7	5-9
in history		10-12	8-12	10-22
God is Merciful...				
in delivering		13-19a	13-18	23-24
in preserving		19b		25

Worship While reading Psalm 150, picture the Temple, a large choir, and an array of musical instruments. The hymns encourage the creative expression of what we have come to know about God.

Psalm 150.1-6

Praise the Lord.
 Praise God in His sanctuary;
 praise Him in His mighty expanse.
 Praise Him for His mighty deeds [or, *acts of power*];
 praise Him according to His excellent greatness.
 Praise Him with trumpet sound;

praise Him with harp and lyre,
 praise Him with timbrel [or, *tambourine*] and dancing;
 praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe.
 Praise Him with loud cymbals;
 praise Him with resounding cymbals.
 Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.
 Praise the Lord!

The worship setting of hymns also included the processions of pilgrims heading to the three annual festivals and the processions of victorious warriors, returning with the king from battle (Psalm 68.24-27).

Typical Structure

Psalm 117 shows the typical elements of a hymn: a general call to praise, the praise itself, and a final call to praise.

Psalm 117:1-2

Praise the Lord, all nations;
 laud [or, *extol*] Him, all you peoples!
 For His lovingkindness is great toward us,
 and the truth [or, *faithfulness*] of the Lord is everlasting.
 Praise the Lord!

Psalm 113 gives these typical elements in more detail.

A general call to praise Hymns, like thanksgivings, begin with an invitation.

Psalm 113.1-3

Praise the Lord!
 Praise, O servants of the Lord,
 praise the name of the Lord.
 Blessed be the name of the Lord
 from this time forth and forever.
 From the rising of the sun to its setting
 the name of the Lord is to be praised.

“Praise the Lord!” is a serious exhortation. In fact, several of these psalms consist of nothing but exhortation (compare Psalms 50, 81, 95). Other psalms call the heavens, the earth, the rulers, and all people to worship.

The praise itself The psalmist presents the reasons for praise, centering on God’s *majesty* and *mercy*. These two themes stand together: the One, who sits enthroned “above,” “comes down” to His people.

First, God is *majestic*. Both creation and history bear witness to God’s majestic character.

Psalm 113.4-5

The Lord is high above all nations;
 His glory is above the heavens.
 Who is like the Lord our God,
 who is enthroned on high...?

Second, God is *merciful*. In His great mercy, God cares for His people.

Psalm 113.6-9a

...who humbles Himself to behold
the things that are in heaven and in the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of His people.
He makes the barren woman abide in the house
as a joyful mother of children.

The final call to praise Having given reasons, the call to praise God is renewed. This call can become the focus of the entire psalm (compare Psalms 95, 96, 98, 100, 145, 148, 150). But often, as in Psalm 113, it simply consists of the command to “Praise the Lord!”

Psalm 113.9b

Praise the Lord!

Just as contemporary songs have powerful effects on people, the hymns can be powerful reminders of God’s majesty and mercy. The hymns remind us that getting to know God is not one part of the spiritual life; it is the essence of the spiritual life!

Hymns that focus on a particular theme

Hymns emphasizing God’s majesty

Enthronement God’s sovereignty is celebrated. Sometimes, God’s universal rule,⁴ rather than the rule of the Davidic king, is in mind. But other psalms focusing on God’s enthronement prophesy of the kingdom. Common phrases include: “the Lord reigns” and “the great King.” In addition to Psalm 47 (below), compare Psalms 47, 93, 95-99.

Psalm 47.5-9

God has ascended with a shout,
the Lord, with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth;
sing praises with a skillful psalm.
God reigns over the nations,
God sits on His holy throne.
The princes of the people have assembled themselves
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the shields of the earth belong to God;
He is highly exalted.

Creation In Psalms 8, 19a, 29, 104, and 139, God’s creative power is emphasized. Compare Psalm 104.

Psalm 104.5-9

He established the earth upon its foundations,
so that it will not totter forever and ever.

⁴ Some restrict the term “enthronement” to this use, distinguishing them from the Royal or Messianic psalms.

You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
 the waters were standing above the mountains.
 At Your rebuke they fled,
 at the sound of Your thunder they hurried away.
 The mountains rose;
 the valleys sank down
 to the place which You established for them.
 You set a boundary that they may not pass over,
 so that they will not return to cover the earth.

History Psalms 78, 105, 135, and 136 all recount the details of God's covenant faithfulness to Israel. Compare Psalm 105.

Psalm 105.8-15

He has remembered His covenant forever,
 the word which He commanded to a thousand generations,
the covenant which He made with Abraham,
 and His oath to Isaac.
 Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute,
 to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
 saying,
 "To you I will give the land of Canaan
 as the portion of your inheritance,"
 When they were only a few men in number,
 very few, and strangers in it.
 And they wandered about from nation to nation,
 from *one* kingdom to another people.
 He permitted no man to oppress them,
 and He reprov'd kings for their sakes:
 "Do not touch My anointed ones,
 and do My prophets no harm."

The call to praise in these psalms can turn into exhortation. God's faithfulness is contrasted with Israel's unfaithfulness. Compare Psalms 50, 81, 95.

Hymns emphasizing God's mercy

Mercy Psalm 67 praises God for judging the enemies of Israel. Psalm 103 praises God for delivering His people.

Psalm 103.1-5

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
 and all that is within me, *bless* His holy name.
 Bless the Lord, O my soul,
 and forget none of His benefits:
 Who pardons all your iniquities,
 Who heals all your diseases;
 Who redeems your life from the pit,
 Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;
 Who satisfies your years with good things,
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.

Zion The *songs of Zion* focus on the city of God (Jerusalem) and its need for the "Great King." Compare Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 133. Like the enthronement psalms, Zion psalms may prophesy of the kingdom. Some of the Zion hymns, e.g., Psalm 122, were occasioned by the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Reasons for Praising God

Psalms 122.1-9

I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the Lord.”
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem,
Jerusalem, that is built
as a city that is compact together;
to which the tribes go up,
even the tribes of the Lord—
an ordinance for Israel—
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
For there thrones were set for judgment,
the thrones of the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.
May peace be within your walls,
and prosperity within your palaces.”
For the sake of my brothers and my friends, I will now say,
“May peace be within you.”
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.

Victory Compare Psalms 24, 68, 149. In Psalm 24, God, victorious in battle, leads a procession into Jerusalem.

Psalms 24.7-10

Lift up your heads, O gates,
and be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in!
Who is the King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O gates,
and lift *them* up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in!
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
He is the King of glory. *Selah.*

Wisdom Psalms 1, 19, 37, 49, 111, 112, 119, 127, 128, and 133 (compare also: 50, 81?, and 103) are hymns that praise God for giving wisdom to those He loves. His Word helps those in trouble (Psalms 19 and 119); His commands encourage love between God’s people (Psalm 133).

Psalms 133.1-3

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
for brothers to dwell together in unity!
It is like the precious oil
upon the head,
coming down upon the beard,
even Aaron’s beard,
coming down upon the edge of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon
coming down upon the mountains of Zion;
for there the Lord commanded the blessing—
life forever.

Psalms Discussed

The following psalms are used as examples in the discussions of the various settings and types.

Psalm	Discussion
3.1-8	Laments that follow the typical form
6.1-3	Laments that focus on repentance
8.1-9	Hymns in setting of deeper personal encounter
14.1-3	Laments that focus on wisdom
16.1-2	Laments that focus on confidence
18.37-42	Thanksgivings that focus on military victory
20.1-5	Laments that focus on prayer
22.25-26	Thanksgivings in setting of public thank offerings
24.7-10	Hymns that focus on God's mercy/victory
26.1-7	Laments that focus on innocence
30.1-12	Thanksgivings that follow the typical form
34.1-4	Thanksgivings in setting of public thank offerings
34.8-22	Thanksgivings that focus on public worship
38.1-4	Laments that focus on repentance
47.5-9	Hymns that focus on God's enthronement
66.13-20	Thanksgivings in setting of fulfilled vows
103.1-5	Hymns that focus on God's mercy
104.5-9	Hymns that focus on God's majesty/creation
105.8-15	Hymns that focus on God's majesty/history
113.1-9	Hymns that follow the typical form
117.1-2	Hymns that follow the typical form
122.1-9	Hymns that focus on God's mercy/Zion Pilgrimage
133.1-3	Hymns that focus on God's mercy/wisdom
137.8-9	Laments that focus on imprecation
150.1-6	Hymns in setting of public worship

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