

Introduction to the Book of the Psalms¹

What are the Psalms?

The book of Psalms (also called the Psalter) contains 150 prayers, songs, liturgies, and poems.

These works were used by individuals, ancient communities of God's people, and Israelite kings. This includes a wide variety of psalms:

- ♦ Prayers for help
- ♦ Hymns of praise
- ♦ Liturgies
- ♦ Instructional psalms
- ♦ Songs of thanksgiving
- ♦ Royal psalms
- ♦ Trust psalms
- ♦ Acrostic poems
- ♦ Festival psalms
- ♦ Historical psalms

The structure(s) of the Psalms

The book of Psalms is divided into five smaller books:

1–41 Book I

42–72 Book II

73–89 Book III

90–106 Book IV

107–150 Book V

Within these smaller books are other divisions, such as the “Psalms of Asaph” (50, 73–83), “Psalms of the Korahites” (42–49, 84–85, 87–88), and “Songs of Ascent” (120–134). It's better not to associate these titles with authorship. The Psalms were composed by many different authors who are not identified. Some psalms include a superscription (a title, some instruction, or a bit of context at the start of a psalm) such as “of David” or “of Asaph.” These headings do not necessarily mean that David or Asaph wrote these psalms, but that the poem or song is associated with them in some manner. You can think of these titles in terms of music styles: a “Davidic” psalm versus an “Asaphite” psalm, somewhat akin to a “rock” song versus a “pop” song.

The Psalms have been associated with music for a very long time. Since their inception, God's people have found in the Psalms words that help them articulate their experience of life. As often happens in religious life, the more powerful an image, the more readily it lends itself to music. The words of the Psalms have power—so much so that they are often put to music. In fact, the very name “Psalms” comes from the Latin word *psalmos*,

1 This introduction is adapted from Rolf A. Jacobson, “Psalms,” *Lutheran Study Bible* (Augsburg Fortress, 2025), 773–774.

which means “song.” In the New Testament epistles, several passages exhort Christians to sing “psalms” in their faith life (1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

Some individual psalms associate themselves directly with music in the superscriptions. The superscriptions were not originally included in the psalms. They were added at a later date. We don’t know what several of the superscription terms mean: “with stringed instruments” (Psalm 4), “for the flutes” (Psalm 5), “according to The Sheminith” (Psalms 6; 12), “A Shiggaion” (Psalm 7), “according to The Gittith” (Psalm 8), and “according to Muth-labben” (Psalm 9). These may have been musical instructions for the singing of these psalms (see 1 Chronicles 15:19-22). The term *Selah* [say-LAH], which occurs seventy-one times in the book of Psalms (and three times in Habakkuk 3), is also unknown. Many scholars believe this term was a musical or liturgical notation.

How should we interpret the Psalms?

In the Christian Bible, as we have already discussed, the title given to this book is “Psalms” (songs). In the Jewish Bible, the book has a different name. The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is *Tehillim* [teh-hill-EEM], which means “praises.”

Martin Luther wrote that the book of Psalms

might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book. (LW 35:254)

By this, Luther obviously did not mean that the Psalms teach Christian beliefs, since they were all written before the time of Christ. Rather, Luther was referring to the fact that the Psalms explore the highs and lows of the life of faith. They sing with joy and trust from the mountaintop moments and cry out with pain “out of the depths” (Psalm 130:1). The Psalms weep with those who suffer, laugh with those who celebrate, and teach all of us about the long journey of faith.