

The Writings constitute the third major division of the First Testament. They represent a much looser grouping than those in the first or second divisions. They have been drawn together from a wider range of traditions, genres (kinds of literature) and time periods. We are presenting them here grouped by genre, so that each can be read meaningfully alongside other examples of the same kind of literature.

Three of the books in the Writings are collections of song lyrics. These songs were composed over the course of many centuries. Psalms contains nearly 150 worship songs that were written for individual or community use over a period of some 700 years, from the time of Moses up to the time when the Jerusalem temple was rebuilt. Song of Songs is a much smaller collection of wedding songs (only half a dozen) that may have been used for years in marriage celebrations before being gathered together. Lamentations contains five songs that all mourn the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Writings also contain several books from the “wisdom” tradition. This was a school of thought that flourished in Israel and in other countries of the ancient Near East. In Israel this tradition claimed that wisdom ultimately came from the LORD. Even when human ability and skill were involved, they were only the means of discerning the order God himself had placed in the creation. Wisdom came from finding the right way to live in God’s world. So for Israel’s writers, the acknowledgment of God was the first step of the truly wise. The wisdom teachers loved to formulate and collect “proverbs,” pithy sayings that expressed vital truths about life in a compact and striking way. King Solomon was one of the most outstanding of these teachers, and two collections of his sayings, one likely recorded in his lifetime and the other a couple of centuries later, constitute the bulk of the book of Proverbs. Solomon may also be the author of Ecclesiastes, a book that weaves such sayings together with autobiographical musings to provide a perspective on life that complements the one in Proverbs. Wisdom teachers also cast their reflections in the form of dialogues between people who took turns making poetic speeches; the book of Job provides an example of this type of wisdom literature.

Just as the psalms were created within the worship experience of the community, so the two historical books among the Writings arose from that experience. Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah is a sprawling history that runs all the way from the beginning of the human race to the Judeans’ return from exile. Its central concern, however, is with how God chose Jerusalem as the place where he would be worshiped. It describes how a temple was built there, destroyed, and then rebuilt as a place where people of all nations could come to seek the true God. The book of Esther is much shorter and more narrowly focused. It

explains why a new worship festival, Purim, was added to those which Moses commanded the people to observe. But in the process, it offers profound insights into the workings of God's invisible hand in history and into the calling of each individual to be part of those workings.

The remaining book in the Writings, Daniel, is a combination two different kinds of literature. It is half history and half apocalypse. Its first half tells six stories of how God preserved and protected Daniel and his friends in exile because they remained exclusively devoted to him. The second half of the book describes how, on four occasions, Daniel spoke with angels after praying or seeing a vision. These angels explained God's purposes for his people in the years to come.

The Writings thus complete the First Testament by drawing a diverse collection of books into its pages. They review the history of the covenant people, and they display the theological and literary riches the nation possessed because, as one of the psalmists wrote, God *has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel.*

The book of Psalms is a collection of poems that were originally set to music. In other words, the psalms are the lyrics to songs. Many of them contain musical notations, and their introductions sometimes include musical instructions and the names of their tunes. Like the songs we know today, they were originally written in response to specific occasions in the lives of their authors. (Some of their introductions indicate what these occasions were.) But they were then used in worship at various times by the whole community of believers. After the people of Israel returned from exile in Babylon and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, many of the songs that had been written and sung over the centuries were collected and used in worship in this second temple. That collection forms the basis of the book of Psalms as we know it today.

This book contains the words to 147 different songs. (They have traditionally been numbered from 1 to 150; however, two of them have been split in half, 9–10 and 42–43, while another has been included twice and numbered both 14 and 53.) Because each of the songs is an independent composition, they are all meaningful when read individually. The different psalms cover a broad range of human experiences in relationship to God. They both inform us about those experiences and provide a vehicle through which we can express ourselves as we share them.

At the same time, the book as a whole has been deliberately structured, and this adds a further level of meaning. The collection is divided into five parts by the insertion of four variations on the formula, *Praise be to the LORD . . . Amen and Amen!* This creates five “books” within the collection. This seems intended to remind the reader of the five “books” into which the law of Moses was traditionally divided. The implication is that even though these poems were originally sung in worship, they can also be read and studied privately for instruction in God’s ways. The psalm that comes first in the collection (1) emphasizes the value of such meditation. It appears to have been placed there deliberately to make this point. This theme is also stressed at the beginning of book three (in 73) and near the end of the whole collection (in 145).

These five “books,” in their general outlines, also tell a story. They trace Israel’s history in its successive stages: monarchy, exile and return. The first two books consist mostly of psalms by David, the man God established as king over Israel and as the head of its royal line. Taken together, these two books begin and end with psalms about God establishing the king on the throne (2 and 72). But the third book then begins with the question of why the wicked prosper (73) and with a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem (74). This book ends with a similar complaint that God has abandoned David’s line (89). In

other words, book three recalls the situation of exile. The fourth book then opens with a reminder that God is the true *dwelling place* of the people of Israel (90). The psalms in this section state repeatedly that *the LORD reigns* (93, 97, 99)—in other words, Israel’s true king is still on the throne. This fourth book nevertheless ends with a plea for God to bring the exiled people home (106). The fifth book begins with a declaration that God has indeed brought the exiles back (107). It includes many “songs of ascents” (120–134), which were sung by pilgrims going up to the temple in Jerusalem. This suggests a context in which the people have returned to the land. Therefore, appropriately, this fifth book (and thus the whole collection) ends with a call to praise (at the end of 145), followed by five songs of praise (146–150). In other words, the very form in which Israel’s worship songs have been collected illustrates one foundational reason for its worship: God has been faithful to the nation, judging it by means of exile but then bringing it back home again.

And so two principles largely account for the structure and meaning of the book of Psalms when it is read as a collection: the call to meditate on these psalms in the same way as on the law of Moses, and the call to remember God’s historical faithfulness and to respond to it with continuing praise.

# Psalms

## BOOK I

### *Psalms 1–41*

#### PSALM 1

Blessed are those  
who do not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
but who delight in the law of the LORD  
and meditate on his law day and night.  
They are like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers.

Not so the wicked!  
They are like chaff  
that the wind blows away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will be destroyed.

#### PSALM 2

Why do the nations conspire<sup>a</sup>  
and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth rise up  
and the rulers band together  
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,  
“Let us break their chains  
and throw off their shackles.”

The One enthroned in heaven laughs;  
the Lord scoffs at them.

He rebukes them in his anger  
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,  
“I have installed my king  
on Zion, my holy mountain.”

I will proclaim the LORD’s decree:

He said to me, “You are my son;  
today I have become your father.

Ask me,  
and I will make the nations your inheritance,  
the ends of the earth your possession.  
You will break them with a rod of iron<sup>†</sup>;  
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”

Therefore, you kings, be wise;  
be warned, you rulers of the earth.

Serve the LORD with fear  
and celebrate his rule with trembling.

Kiss his son, or he will be angry  
and you and your ways will be destroyed,  
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

### PSALM 3

*A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.*

LORD, how many are my foes!  
How many rise up against me!  
Many are saying of me,  
“God will not deliver him.”<sup>\*</sup>

But you, LORD, are a shield around me,  
my glory, the one who lifts my head high.  
I call out to the LORD,  
and he answers me from his holy mountain.<sup>\*</sup>

I lie down and sleep;  
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.  
I will not fear though tens of thousands  
assail me on every side.

Arise, LORD!  
Deliver me, my God!

Strike all my enemies on the jaw;  
break the teeth of the wicked.

From the LORD comes deliverance.  
May your blessing be on your people.\*

#### PSALM 4

*For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm of David.*

Answer me when I call to you,  
my righteous God.

Give me relief from my distress;  
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

How long will you men turn my glory into shame?  
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?\*

Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself;  
the LORD hears when I call to him.

Tremble and\* do not sin;  
when you are on your beds,  
search your hearts and be silent.\*

Offer the sacrifices of the righteous  
and trust in the LORD.

Many, LORD, are asking, “Who will bring us prosperity?”  
Let the light of your face shine on us.

Fill my heart with joy  
when their grain and new wine abound.

In peace I will lie down and sleep,  
for you alone, LORD,  
make me dwell in safety.

#### PSALM 5

*For the director of music. For pipes. A psalm of David.*

Listen to my words, LORD,  
consider my lament.

Hear my cry for help,  
my King and my God,  
for to you I pray.

In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice;  
in the morning I lay my requests before you  
and wait expectantly.

For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness;  
with you, evil people are not welcome.

The arrogant cannot stand  
in your presence.

You hate all who do wrong;  
you destroy those who tell lies.

The bloodthirsty and deceitful  
you, LORD, detest.

But I, by your great love,  
can come into your house;  
in reverence I bow down  
toward your holy temple.

Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness  
because of my enemies—  
make your way straight before me.

Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;  
their heart is filled with malice.

Their throat is an open grave;  
with their tongues they tell lies.

Declare them guilty, O God!  
Let their intrigues be their downfall.

Banish them for their many sins,  
for they have rebelled against you.

But let all who take refuge in you be glad;  
let them ever sing for joy.

Spread your protection over them,  
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.

Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous;  
you surround them with your favor as with a shield.

## PSALM 6

*For the director of music. With stringed instruments. According to sheminith.<sup>a</sup>  
A psalm of David.*

LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger  
or discipline me in your wrath.

Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;  
heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.

My soul is in deep anguish.  
How long, LORD, how long?

Turn, LORD, and deliver me;  
 save me because of your unfailing love.  
 Among the dead no one proclaims your name.  
 Who praises you from the grave?

I am worn out from my groaning.

All night long I flood my bed with weeping  
 and drench my couch with tears.  
 My eyes grow weak with sorrow;  
 they fail because of all my foes.

Away from me, all you who do evil,  
 for the LORD has heard my weeping.

The LORD has heard my cry for mercy;  
 the LORD accepts my prayer.

All my enemies will be overwhelmed with shame and anguish;  
 they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame.

#### PSALM 7

*A shiggaion<sup>a</sup> of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning Cush, a Benjamite.*

LORD my God, I take refuge in you;  
 save and deliver me from all who pursue me,  
 or they will tear me apart like a lion  
 and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me.

LORD my God, if I have done this  
 and there is guilt on my hands—  
 if I have repaid my ally with evil  
 or without cause have robbed my foe—  
 then let my enemy pursue and overtake me;  
 let him trample my life to the ground  
 and make me sleep in the dust.<sup>b</sup>

Arise, LORD, in your anger;  
 rise up against the rage of my enemies.  
 Awake, my God; decree justice.

Let the assembled peoples gather around you,  
 while you sit enthroned over them on high.  
 Let the LORD judge the peoples.

Vindicate me, LORD, according to my righteousness,  
 according to my integrity, O Most High.

Bring to an end the violence of the wicked  
 and make the righteous secure—