

LITERARY OVERVIEW

- **Title:** Psalms – transliteration of Gk. “psalms” from Heb. mizmor meaning “song.” The Hebrew title was Tehillim meaning “praises.”
- **Author:** David (73), Sons of Korah (11), Asaph (12), Moses (1), Solomon (2?), and anonymous writers.
- **Date:** from as early as 15th century B.C. to post-exile.
- **Form/Genre:** Hebrew poetry (parallelism) or lyric.
A short poem that expresses the thoughts and/or feelings of a speaker. Lyrics capture an experience, feeling, or idea at the height of its intensity. Lyrics unfold according to a three-part structure: (1) introduction to the thought, feeling, or situation to which the poet is responding; (2) development of the main theme; (3) rounding off the poem on a note of resolution and closure. Lyric poets use as many as four ways of developing their theme: repetition; contrast; catalog or listing; association (in which the poet branches out from the initial motif to a related one). Lyrics do not ordinarily tell a story, and they often have a disjointed structure in which the poet jumps from one thought or feeling to another one.¹
- As such, their poetic nature needs to be kept in mind as reading.

Image	A word or phrase that names a concrete action or thing; by extension, a character, setting, or event in a story is an image—a concrete embodiment of human experience or an idea.	the way (or path); the congregation (or assembly); nature (or harvest) (Psalm 1)
Metaphor	An implied comparison that does not use the formula <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> : “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1).	“The Lord is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1).
Simile	A figure of speech in which a writer compares two things using the formula <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .	“He is like a tree planted by streams of water” (Ps. 1:3).
Personification	A figure of speech in which human attributes are given to something nonhuman, such as animals, objects, or abstract qualities.	Light and truth are personified as guides in Psalm 43:3 .
Hyperbole	A figure of speech in which a writer consciously exaggerates for the sake of effect; usually that effect is emotional, and thus, loosely put, hyperbole usually expresses emotional truth rather than literal truth.	“My tears have been my food day and night” (Ps. 42:3).
Apostrophe	A figure of speech in which the writer addresses someone absent as though present and capable of responding. By slight extension, an apostrophe might be an address to something nonhuman as though it were human and capable of responding, even if the speaker is in the presence of the object.	The poet in Psalm 148:3 might well be looking up at the sun, moon, or stars as he commands them to praise God.

TYPES OF PSALMS²

- *Laments*, whose primary function is to lay a troubled situation before the Lord, asking him for help. There are community laments, dealing with trouble faced by the people of God as a whole (e.g., Psalm 12), and individual laments, where the troubles face a particular member of the people (e.g., Psalm 13). This category is the largest by far, including as much as a third of the whole Psalter.
- *Hymns of praise*, whose primary goal is to call and enable God's people to admire God's great attributes and deeds. These can focus, e.g., on a particular set of attributes (e.g., on God's benevolence in Psalm 145), on God's universal kingship over his creation (e.g., Psalm 93), or on God's works of creation (e.g., Psalm 8).
- *Hymns of thanksgiving*, which thank God for his answer to a petition; sometimes the petition can be identified as one of the lament psalms. Like laments, there are community (e.g., Psalm 9) and individual (e.g., Psalm 30) thanksgiving psalms.
- *Hymns celebrating God's law*, which speak of the wonders of the Torah (the Law of Moses) and help worshipers to aspire to obey it more fully (e.g., Psalm 119).
- *Wisdom psalms*, which take themes from the Wisdom Books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) and make them the topic of song (e.g., Psalms 1; 37).
- *Songs of confidence*, which enable worshipers to deepen their trust in God through all manner of difficult circumstances (e.g., Psalm 23).
- *Royal psalms*, which are concerned with the Davidic monarchy as the vehicle of blessing for the people of God. Some of these are prayers (e.g., Psalm 20), some are thanksgivings (e.g., Psalm 21). All relate to the Messiah, the ultimate heir of David, either by setting a pattern (Psalms 20–21) or by portraying the king's reign in such a way that only the Messiah can completely fulfill it (e.g., Psalms 2; 72), or by focusing primarily on the future aspect (e.g., Psalm 110).
- *Historical psalms*, which take a lesson from the history of God's dealings with his people; these are generally corporate in their focus (e.g., Psalm 78).
- *Prophetic hymns*, which echo themes found in the Prophets, especially calling the people to covenant faithfulness (e.g., Psalm 81).

¹ ESV Literary Study Bible, Crossway Publishers.

² ESV Study Bible, Crossway Publishers.

- Occasions for writing: They were written in many contexts including isolated and persecuted circumstances to writing for liturgical purposes. Some seem to be purposefully “generic” to make them adaptable to God’s people through the ages.
- Primary Purpose: The Psalms are given as an expression of prayers and praise to the covenant God as examples for our instruction and example. These become the inspired song book of the Jewish people, used in temple worship.
- The Psalms are a particular help in **devotional reading**
[The Psalter is] an anatomy of all the parts of the soul....there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. (Calvin)
- Challenges: To share in the experience of the Psalmist before trying to “apply” it to our own life. To sort out what kinds of things are examples for us to pray and what may not be. To share in the “shortened” perspective of human life without undermining the reality of resurrection and future judgment.