

*A Study of the
Book of Psalms*

by Chad Sychtysz

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Preface

I must confess that, until recent years, I was not a big fan of the book of Psalms. First, it seemed to be a collection of random, often repetitive, and sometimes overly gushing prayers of men who were more interested in poetic expressions than in anything of relevant substance to someone living in the twenty-first century. (There are exceptions to this, of course, such as the messianic psalms and a few favorites.) Second, there are *one hundred and fifty psalms*, which is a lot of prayers and poetry to wade through, no matter how you approach them. My past readings of the entire book of Psalms was regarded as more of an accomplishment of time and effort (like, “Whew! I made it! Now for Proverbs . . .”) than an endeavor that was rewarding and fulfilling. For these reasons alone, I had been a gospel minister for two and a half decades before finally studying this book in detail.

I am now embarrassed about my earlier view of Psalms and of the state of mind that produced that view in the first place. As with other books of the Bible, our readings of Scripture can be affected by personal experiences, levels of spiritual maturity, traditional thinking, and seasons of life. This was certainly the case with me: other books seemed more important to focus on at the time, and Psalms was always (and often, easily) pushed to the back burner, so to speak. But I am a bit older now, my view of life has changed, my appetite for earlier pursuits has mellowed and matured, and—in ways I cannot fully explain—the book of Psalms has suddenly become extremely attractive to me. The psalmists are not just men who are poetically writing down their prayers, but they are men who are undeniably—sometimes, for me, even *uncomfortably*—closer to God than I have seen in many Christians today. Instead of wanting to rush through their works, I found myself being *drawn* to them, *fascinated* with them, and even *transformed* by them. It was like I had discovered a secret

way to communicate with God that I had never known before—one that was right in front of me all along.

The book of Psalms is still a challenging read: it is still long, often repetitive, and filled with phrases that are antiquated or a bit unfamiliar to the modern ear. Despite these things, however, I regard it a well-spent journey to go through these prayers, petitions, songs, and (at times) tearful pleadings to God. If I remain faithful to God and am blessed to be in heaven, I know I shall meet the men who wrote these great works, and we will have much to talk about. All said, I have found a treasure in my study of this great book, and this study guide is all about me sharing this treasure with you.

Chad Sychtysz

April 2, 2020

Introduction

The Psalms is one of the most beloved books of the Old Testament (OT). More than any other single book in Scripture, the Psalms provide the communication and spiritual mindset that believers need in order to draw near in fellowship to God. In fact, the psalmists tell us more directly about God’s holiness, righteousness, and majesty than perhaps any other book of the Bible. The psalmists did not just believe in God and pray to Him; they were completely *devoted* to and *worshiped* Him as the sovereign Creator. For such reasons, believers today will often read, quote, and identify with the Psalms more than any other OT passages.

Christians, when asked for their favorite Bible passage, often turn to a psalm. Preachers and shepherds counseling and comforting those in grief readily find a fitting psalm. Our brethren wanting to proclaim their joy at some victory may couch their thanksgiving and praise in the language of a psalm.¹

The Psalms were quoted about seventy times by Jesus and His apostles in the New Testament (NT), which is more than is quoted of any other OT book except Isaiah. The most quoted psalm in the NT is Psalm 110—up to eighteen times, depending on how one views a “quote.” “Few books of the Old Testament have been read more than the Psalms, because, whether it be through Jewish and Christian liturgy [i.e., worship services] or through personal piety, they seem to come closest to the heart of believers.”²

1 Edwin Crozier, *Praying Like the Psalmists: A Study of the Psalms* (Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Press, 2016), 1.

2 Alberto J. Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. John Bowen (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 363; bracketed words are mine.

To read and pray the Psalms is to join the voices of numberless people who too have read and prayed them, have felt their joy, anguish, and indignation [toward sin and wicked people]. Rarely has human history enjoyed the luxury of a literature so cathartic. And seldom has a people opened their souls so freely to all mankind as Israel in the Psalms. There is no better way to enter the spirit of Israelite history and the faith of this people of antiquity than through this book.³

The Hebrew title of the book of Psalms is *Tehillim* (“praises” or “hymns”), since praise is a predominant theme throughout, even though the word occurs only in the title of Psalm 145. The Greek title (in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, ca. 200 BC) is *psalmoi*, from which we get “Psalms.” This corresponds to the Hebrew word *mizmoi* (or, *mizmor*), which means an ode or song, the singing of which is often accompanied by an instrument, particularly the harp or lyre (1 Chron. 16:4–8, 2 Chron. 5:12–13). “To some Psalms, the Hebrew word (*shir*) ‘a song,’ is prefixed. Paul seems to allude to all these terms in Eph 5:19, ‘singing . . . in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.’”⁴ The title “Psalms” is, by itself, a reminder that the book contains not merely poetry, but the songs and hymns of Israel’s worship. These songs were read, recited, sung, and often put to music; collectively, they were regarded as a unique and highly-revered category of Scripture.⁵ The rabbinic title of the book is a reminder that the primary purpose of the book is the praise of God.

3 C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979, 1988), 111; bracketed words are mine.

4 Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, “The Book of Psalms: Introduction,” *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, 1871, electronic edition (database © 2012 by WORDsearch Corp.).

5 This is evident in Jesus’ reference to them in Luke 24:44: “Now He said to them, ‘These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’”

The Psalms are all about singing and praying—something that we, in traditional Christian worship, have for the most part separated. We sing songs, and then we pray prayers; far less, we appreciate (or even recognize) the poetry of God’s word. And yet, “the Psalms still unite in themselves what for us are three separate types of compositions . . . They are *prayers* (words directed to God in supplication or rejoicing), *poetry* (poetical expressions of thought), and *songs* (they go beyond the mere speaking or even recital of a poem and become music).”⁶ In some respect, the Psalms belong to a bygone era in which God’s people sang their prayers to Him in poetic constructs. While this may not seem altogether different than how we use our modern hymnbooks, we do not tend to view hymns in the same way an ancient Israelite viewed the psalms. Even though a number of our hymns *are* prayers put to music (think, for example, of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” “O Jesus, I Have Promised,” or “I Bring My Sins to Thee”), we sing them only as *songs*. Yet, paradoxically, while the structure of our communication with God has changed, the content has largely remained the same. Whatever the psalmists were wrestling with, say, a thousand years before Christ, believers still wrestle with today in some form or another.

The entire collection of Psalms is traditionally known as the Psalter (pronounced “salter”), which refers to a stringed musical instrument, “revealing that these poems of spiritual aspiration were sung with musical accompaniment.”⁷ “The term ‘psalm’ and the title ‘psalter’ for the whole book come from the Greek: *psalterion* is a stringed instrument and *psalmos* is a song accompanied by the instrument in question.”⁸ The Psalms “are all poetical, and of that peculiar parallelism which distinguished

6 Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, trans. Ralph D. Gehrke (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 11.

7 W. T. Purkiser, editor, *Exploring the Old Testament* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1955), 214.

8 Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 363.

Hebrew poetry [see below, “The Poetry of the Psalms”]. They are all lyrical, or songs adapted to musical instruments, and all religious lyrics, or such as were designed to be used in the sanctuary worship.”⁹ While it may sound strange to us today, “the Psalms were not first written and then sung, but *vice versa*. Most of the psalms were first sung and prayed for a long time before they were written down. Those who wrote them down were not [always] the same people who composed them; instead, they were [sometimes] the ones who collected them.”¹⁰

The book of Psalms has long been considered the hymnbook of the Hebrew nation. It is also “the hymnbook of the Bible and of the Christian Church. Music and religion are inseparable. For when man reaches a state of spiritual exaltation in which he feels at one with the eternal God, he naturally expresses himself in poetry and song. And when man is burdened with grief or guilt he pours song from his inmost being, expressing his longings, hopes, and desires.”¹¹

Music is indigenous to man. It is an inborn characteristic of who and what he is. It was placed there by God. It produces something special in him: it enriches his spirit, lifts his hope, and makes an expression of his love more explicit and resplendent. Music affords man the opportunity to express himself in a memorable, poetic form like no other. . . . Furthermore, the human voice is the most expressive of all the implements of music. When the sound of it is combined with melody and rhythm, man can articulate the impulses of his heart in an

9 JFB, *Commentary* (electronic); bracketed words are mine. “It should be observed that, for the most part, Hebrew Poetry is lyrical, a name given to it because it was originally accompanied by music on the lyre” (W. Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 1–4 [Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995], 1:10).

10 Westermann, *The Psalms*, 12; bracketed words are mine.

11 Purkiser, *Exploring the Old Testament*, 214–215.

appealing expression of sincerity, pathos, and emotion. An instrument can only emulate such an action.¹²

Not only do we see an expression of the inner spiritual life of the Hebrews in the Psalms, but, in some sense, of all people of God, throughout all time. Thus, the Psalms provide a very human, but very spiritual, and timeless hymnbook not only for the Hebrews, but for Christians as well. In fact, many songs in our contemporary hymnbooks are simply musical adaptations of certain psalms or quotes from the book of Psalms. Martin Luther (16th century) wrote: “If you want to see the holy Christian church painted in glowing colors and in a form which is really alive, and if you want to do this in a miniature, you must get a hold of the Psalter, and there you will have in your possession a fine, clear, pure mirror which will show you what Christianity really is.”¹³

. . . [T]he Psalms are more than an eye into Israel. They stand as a monumental witness to the timeless and universal nature of man. His heart is turned so easily to sin. Hatred, greed, and disobedience are part of his infamous baggage. Without God, his Creator, he is orphaned in the world. But despite who man is, God sees him as His special creation (Ps. 8) and seeks to redeem him. The essential nature of man is counterbalanced, indeed countermanded, by the essential nature of God. The Psalms capture the qualitative essence of man and God, and lay them out in juxtaposition [i.e., in reference to each other], thus revealing the insufficiency of the one and the all-sufficiency of the other.¹⁴

12 Dee Bowman, “Psalm 19: Music of the Majestic,” *Studies in the Psalms* (Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Bookstore, 2007), 317–318.

13 Quoted in Edward G. Dobson, Charles L. Feinberg, Edward E. Hindson, etc., *Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), 511.

14 Bullock, *Poetic Books*, 111; bracketed words are mine.

Psalms, and psalm-like cultic hymns, have long been part of religious celebrations of the gods, and were common in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and in Syro-Canaanite literature. “We know this literature chiefly through the trove of texts found at the site of Ugarit, on the Mediterranean coast of present-day Syria, dating roughly from 1400 to 1200 BC—several centuries earlier than the main body of biblical writings.”¹⁵

The Hebrew Psalter was by no means an isolated literary phenomenon, since the pagan cultures of the ancient Near East, being themselves polytheistic, were intensely religious and reflected their attitudes in a wide variety of extant [i.e., currently existing] literature, which included epic poetry, hymns, penitential psalms, prayers, incantations, thanksgivings, and petitions addressed to the deities. Nevertheless, the Psalms of the Hebrews must be considered *sui generis* [lit., in a class of its own], since they constituted the supreme example of religious devotion and served as effective vehicles for the propagation of truths unfolded in the processes of divine revelation.¹⁶

The monotheism (i.e., belief in one God) and ethical nature of Hebrew law and prophetic writings naturally produced poetic writings that reflected these qualities. These poetic writings were built upon a deep respect for God, His law, His revealed word, and elevated spiritual beliefs. Simply put, “A superior religious faith will inevitably create a superior religious literature.”¹⁷ We see the same thing today with regard to the thousands of hymns that have sprung from the even *greater* spiritual elevation of Jesus’ teachings and the gospel record, not to mention the

15 Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), xiii.

16 Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 976; bracketed words are mine.

17 Bullock, *Poetic Books*, 113.

countless books that have been written in praise of God and His revealed word.

Purpose of the Psalms

“The book of Psalms is one of the most important and at the same time one of the most difficult books of the Old Testament.”¹⁸ It is important because it provides a reflection of religion in personal experience in vivid, living language. It is difficult because there are so many different authors, times, formats, subject matters, etc., not to mention the difficulty of translating Hebrew poetry and poetic style into English (to be addressed later). The size of the collection alone (150 psalms) is daunting. And yet, “The reality is that most of the Old Testament can be found, to some extent, somewhere in the Psalter.”¹⁹ Thus, there are psalms that speak of the Creation account, deeds of the patriarchs, Israel’s exodus out of Egypt, the 40-year wandering in the wilderness, references and tributes to the Law of Moses, the messages of the prophets, etc. “[The Israelites] saw themselves and their nation as standing squarely in the stream of things that flowed from the past, and believed that their future success lay in knowing and understanding the ways of God which their history recorded.”²⁰

Older Bible criticism—the scrutiny of the Psalms made by scholars, commentators, and historians—considered the psalmists writing only on the behalf of Israel. This view saw the psalmists contributing solely to the temple worship, Levitical ministries, and solemn events in Israel’s long history as God’s chosen people.

18 H. Wheeler Robinson, quoted in Purkiser, *Exploring the Old Testament*, 215.

19 Jeff Wilson, “Introducing the Psalms,” *Studies in the Psalms*, 56.

20 David McClister, “The History of Israel in the Psalms,” *Studies in the Psalms*, 156; bracketed words are mine.

. . . [G]iven the saturation of the Book of Psalms with temple language, it is clear that ‘the psalms were a vital part of the everyday public worship of God in ancient Israel’ (Dillard). This means that the fundamental context of the Psalms is corporate rather than individual, that they were used primarily in public rather than private worship, and that the book should always be read in light of Israel’s national life and covenant.²¹

More recently, however, Bible critics see a more personal aspect of the Psalms. The psalmists were not men writing for purely religious purposes, but were writing about their own personal, shared, and often emotional experiences.

The Psalms in which the first-person pronoun is employed are obviously designed to express primarily the experience of an individual. . . . Of course, this does not preclude the usage of these Psalms in divine worship, but such usage is secondary. While today Christians should sing Psalms in the worship of the Church, they do great wrong to neglect the Psalter in individual devotions.²²

In viewing the Psalms as a whole, it is best not to take one extreme view or the other. There is no question that many psalms *are* about the temple, or a desire to be there (“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD’”—Psalm

21 Shane Scott, “‘How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place,’” *Studies in the Psalms*, 91.

22 Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 310. “. . . [W]e are mistaken when we regard the entire Psalter as designed for the usage of the Temple. That some Psalms were so used cannot be denied, but it is interesting to note that liturgical [i.e., worship service] directions are lacking for many of the Psalms. The Psalter, rather, is primarily a manual and guide and model for the devotional needs of the individual believer. It is a book of prayer and praise, to be meditated upon by the believer, that he may thereby learn to praise God and pray to Him” (*ibid.*, 309).