

A. Names

1. Hebrew title: *Tehillim* - literally, “Praises” (e.g. Ps 145, “praise of David”)
  - a. This title signifies the **aim** of the whole book: the praise of God
2. Greek title: *Psalmos* - literally, “Songs”; translates the Hebrew *mizmor*

B. Definition of “psalm:” “...an act of singing or chanting, a way of using language, with or without actual musical accompaniment, rhythmically and regularly, to implore, to admonish, to reflect – and, above all, to celebrate” (R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 133).

- Parallelism of doublets/triplets: first line sets the premise and the second line intensifies or concretizes the first.

C. The Anatomy of Praise

1. Essential duty of the human race: acknowledgement of God as sovereign
  - a. God is enthroned on the praises of his people (Ps 22:3)
  - b. Praise of God the most powerful activity of God’s people (Ps149:6-9)
2. Definition: the offering up of the whole self to God
  - a. Sometimes expressed in the imperative (Hallelujah – 106:1)
  - b. Exaltation of that which is most important: expresses the inner nature of the relationship between the created with the Creator. Expresses that which is most fundamental to human existence (cf. Rom 1:18-23)

D. Nature of the book

1. An anthology of sacred poems for use in public and private worship
2. Many clearly derive from use in the temple: indicated in some cases by the introductory note, “To the choirmaster/song leader...” (e.g. Pss 4, 5, 6, etc.)
3. Divided by doxologies into five parts or books: generally acknowledged as emulation of the Pentateuch.

E. David

1. Other parts of the Bible attest to David’s creativity in composition
  - a. 1Sam 16:18ff. - David’s prowess on the lyre
  - b. 2Sam 22 - sings the song that becomes Ps 18
  - c. 2Sam 23:1ff. - David the “sweet psalmist of Israel”
  - d. The Books of Chronicles record David’s zeal in organizing the worship of the Lord
2. Associations of various psalms to particular moments of David’s life
  - a. Problems of translation: to, for, of, or by
  - b. Provides at least a setting or context within which to understand – and also a clue to actualization!

B. Other authors

1. Asaph: Pss 50, 73–83
2. Sons of Korah: Pss 42–49, 84, 85, 87, 88 (also ascribed to Heman)
3. Ethan: Ps 8

- **Excursus:** Difficulty of praying with the Psalms
  - Poetry – lost as a common cultural possession in America
    - How to recognize? Lines don't go all the way to the end of the page
    - Evocative of meaning through metaphor and simile
      - Offer a polyvalence of meaning; subtle connotations → use imagination
      - Provokes and demands emotional engagement → emotional quotient is part of the revelatory material
  - Demands that we slow down our technological eagerness to capture the facts

## **Introduction to Poetry**

BY BILLY COLLINS

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

- The person(s) in the psalm address God in a way that makes many of us uneasy:
  - Not polite and respectful in our Midwestern manner
  - Too close for comfort: e.g. Gen 18 – Abraham “dickers” with God
  - More like Jacob wrestling with God
  - Passionate, pleading, insistent tone (importance of “tone”)
- The trouble described us always “ultimate.”
  - Unless God responds all may be lost
  - Marked by urgency (that we may not feel at the moment)
- Distinction between the psalmist and my own identity

- David or some other
- Yet the Psalms teach me how to speak to God with “expectant faith”
  - How to take advantage of the access that I have to God (Eph 2:17-19; 3:11-12)
- An acrostic psalm: according to the first letter of each doublet (22 letters)

**Psalms 25:1 – Of David.**

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.  
 2 O my God, in you I trust;  
     let me not be put to shame;  
     let not my enemies exult over me.  
 3 Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;  
     they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
     teach me your paths.  
 5 Lead me in your truth and teach me,  
     for you are the God of my salvation;  
     for you I wait all the day long.

6 Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,  
     for they have been from of old.  
 7 Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
     according to your steadfast love remember me,  
     for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

8 Good and upright is the LORD;  
     therefore he instructs sinners in the way.  
 9 He leads the humble in what is right,  
     and teaches the humble his way.  
 10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
     for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

11 For your name’s sake, O LORD,  
     pardon my guilt, for it is great.  
 12 Who is the man who fears the LORD?  
     Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.  
 13 His soul shall abide in well-being,  
     and his offspring shall inherit the land.  
 14 The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,  
     and he makes known to them his covenant.  
 15 My eyes are ever toward the LORD,  
     for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,  
     for I am lonely and afflicted.  
 17 The troubles of my heart are enlarged;

- bring me out of my distresses.
- 18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,  
and forgive all my sins.
- 19 Consider how many are my foes,  
and with what violent hatred they hate me.
- 20 Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me!  
Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
- 21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me,  
for I wait for you.
- 22 Redeem Israel, O God,  
out of all his troubles

v. 1 – To you, O Lord...

- Initial invocation: addresses God by name → familiarity and boldness
  - Characteristic of many of the psalms, but especially the prayers
  - Use of the Divine Name in the vocative: very clear and specific on the “You” being addressed
    - ‘Adonay’ identifies “what” God is, i.e. Lord – King, Creator, Father
    - Therefore, it also identifies “me” and the relationship: servant, creature, son/daughter
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vv. 2-7 – O my God...

- Declaration of trust/hope
  - Coupled with an introduction of the concern: shame, boasting of enemies
    - Which would lead to ineffectiveness in exercising responsibility
  - Wrapped up with further declaration of hope
- Appeal to know the Lord: His inner nature and character
- Remember – make your character and covenant present and ready for action
  - Essence of prayer is to ask God to turn his character into conduct
  - I.e. identifies the  **motive**  or reason why God should act – based upon the Covenant and on His character

vv. 8-15 – Good and upright...

- Praise of the God of the Covenant
- The heart of the prayer: Pardon my guilt
- Confession of the just one

vv. 16-21 – Turn to me...

- Another set of  **motives**  – founded upon the state of the psalmist, and the intensity of his enemies
- Bring me out...deliver me – resonance with the Exodus (semantic field)
- May integrity and uprightness...for I wait for you

v. 22 – Redeem Israel

- Recapitulates and widens the scope of the prayer

## II. Interpreting the Cursing Psalms

### A. Theological Perspective

1. The psalmist views himself as unjustly treated a violation of the Covenant (Ps: 55:12-14; 109:25).
2. He recognizes that his suffering is for the Lord: Ps 69:7-9
3. His faith in God remains intact: Ps109:21,26
4. Sees himself in solidarity with the community of the faithful: Ps 69:6

### B. Principles of Judgment

1. Expects the Lord to deal with his enemies: Ps 35:1
2. Understands that the wicked have brought punishment upon themselves: Ps 35:8; 5:10; 7:15-16
3. Views God as the agent of retribution: Ps109:17-19
4. Recognizes that his enemies have defied not just him but God: Ps 79:12
5. Does not take matters into his own hands but commits the consequences to God.

### Psalm 58

0 To the choirmaster: A Miktam according to Do Not Destroy.

1 Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge the sons of men uprightly?

2 Nay, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth.

3 The wicked go astray from the womb, they err from their birth, speaking lies.

4 They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, 5 so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter.

6 O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!

7 Let them vanish like water that runs away; like grass let them be trodden down and wither. 8 Let them be like the snail which dissolves into slime, like the untimely birth that never sees the sun.

9 Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!

10 The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.

11 Men will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth."