

# The Psalms

Richard J. Clifford

THE PSALMS WERE PRAYED by David and Solomon, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus, Matthew and Paul, Jerome and Augustine, Ibn Ezra and Rashi, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, and Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa—in short, by Jews and Christians through the ages. To such prayers, the psalms were both inspired prayers and a school of prayer, teaching one how to pray. This article describes the history of the psalter, as the psalms are collectively called, the types into which they divide, and the characteristics of their poetry.

The English word “psalm” comes from the Greek and Latin translations of Hebrew *mizmôr*, “accompanied song.” The psalter contains 150 psalms arranged in five “books”—Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–50. Each concludes with a doxology or praising verse (Pss. 41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48; 150:1–6).<sup>1</sup> Many of the psalms within each book have been carefully placed with nearby psalms according to themes and repetition of key words.

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1. There are two different modern systems of numbering verses in English-printed psalters. The most common system is that of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Revised English Bible (REB), New International Bible (NEB), and Contemporary English Version (CEV), which assigns no verse number to the superscriptions. I use this system. The other, which follows printed Hebrew Bibles, assigns a verse number to the superscriptions (thus is frequently one

### Authorship and Date

Like nearly all biblical literature, the psalms are anonymous. About half begin with superscriptions linking the psalm to David and even to incidents in his life (e.g., Psalm 3, "A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom"), but the references mean only that the psalm is illustrated by David's life, not that David is its author. The reference is a statement of genre rather than authorship, like the traditional attributions of wisdom literature to Solomon and law to Moses. The superscriptions were added at a time when the psalms had been removed from their original temple context, perhaps to make readers more conscious of their personal situations when they prayed the psalm. David, of course, could have written some of them, for he was a musician and poet (1 Sam. 16:18; 2 Sam. 1:17-27); the vast majority of the psalms, however, were written by scribes in the king's employ, who had the responsibility for the temple, as part of their duties.

The psalms do not carry exact dates but a few can be dated to particular periods; for example, those that presume a king (e.g., Ps. 2:6; 18:51; 72:1) were written when the monarchy was a live institution (tenth to sixth centuries B.C.) and laments such as Psalm 137:1 presuppose the exile in Babylon. Containing songs of all periods, the psalter has been called the hymnbook of the second temple (515 B.C. to 70 A.D.).

### Original Context: The Temple

Many psalms were originally performed in the temple in Jerusalem, which was the central shrine of the tribes (Pss. 84, 122, 132). The temple was small by modern standards (90' by 30' and ca. 45' in height). It was, literally, a house for God; the people gathered in the surrounding open-air courtyard. God was honored like a great king, some of the elaborate ceremony being performed inside the temple and the rest in the surrounding open-air court where the people could participate. Many of the psalms ultimately originated in the public ceremony.

"Zion" is the name for Jerusalem as a sacred city. Though Yahweh, the God of Israel, could appear and act in other places, it was in Jerusalem

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verse behind NRSV) and sometimes divides verses differently. This system is used by the New American Bible (NAB) and the Jewish Publication Society Version (NJPS). All quotations from the Psalms are my translation.

that he was preeminently present to Israel; only here was Israel “before the Lord.” Here the Lord was enthroned upon the cherubim (Pss. 80; 99:1) to “judge” (to govern justly) his people. Zion was also the goal of the three annual feasts of pilgrimage (discussed below). Though the entire universe be threatened, it was the one secure place that could not be shaken or destroyed (Pss. 46:2–3; 48:4–8; 76:3). The “Songs of Zion” (Pss. 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 121, 122) celebrate the city as the site of the victory over primordial enemies, as the residence of the Lord and the Davidic king, and the place where God gives his decrees. In early Judaism, Jews developed the practice of turning toward Jerusalem when they prayed (Dan. 6:10).

The psalms give little indication of the ritual that originally accompanied them, for now they are part of a book designed for readers who no longer take part in the temple ritual. The fact that ritual texts such as Exodus 35–39 and Leviticus 1–16 do not mention songs does not mean that rituals were unaccompanied by singing, for ritual texts are prescriptions for correct performance, not descriptions of the liturgy. In fact, the psalms themselves refer to liturgical actions—feasts (Pss. 65:1–4; 81:3), visits to the temple (Pss. 5:7; 65:4), processions (Pss. 48:12–14; 118:26–27), sacrifices (Pss. 4:5; 107:22; 116:17–18), and priestly benedictions (Pss. 115:14–15; 134:3). Some presume two choirs or a cantor plus choir (Pss. 15, 24, 132, 134). We know that the psalms were not recited silently, for Hebrew verbs of emotion used in them can refer to outward expression as well as inner feeling; “to rejoice” can mean to shout joyously; “to meditate” can mean to recite aloud. Musical instruments are frequently mentioned: the trumpet or ram’s horn, the lyre, and the harp. Evidence thus points to noisy and communal performances of the psalms.

The temple liturgy revolved around the three great feasts of the year—Passover and Unleavened Bread in the early spring; Pentecost at the wheat harvest seven weeks later, and Ingathering (also called Booths and Tabernacles or simply “the feast”) in the early fall. Each was the occasion for celebrating the bounty of the land and the divinely led history of the people Israel.

The first feast, Passover, commemorated the exodus from Egypt and entry into the Promised Land (Exod. 12–13). Psalms that celebrate the exodus-conquest, such as 105, 114, 135, 136, and 147, could have been sung appropriately during the feast. Psalms 113–18, called in early Judaism “the Great Hallel” (praise), were sung at this time. The second feast, Pentecost (also called Firstfruits and the Feast of Weeks) was associated with the giv-

ing of the law at least by the second century B.C. and perhaps much earlier. Psalms 50 and 81 would have been appropriate at this time because they indict the people for not observing the covenant and law given at Sinai. The third feast was Ingathering or Tabernacles; in the early period, it was also at one time the feast of the New Year, when Israel celebrated the Lord's creation victory over the forces of chaos and which included a celebration of the enthronement of God as king of heaven and earth. An enthronement ceremony would have been good background for acclamations of the Lord's kingship such as Psalms 47, 93, 95-100 and for celebrations of the Lord's world-establishing victory such as Psalms 29, 46, 48, 76, 93, 95-99, and 104.

Not all the psalms were concerned with public events, however. Fully a third are "individual laments," which are pleas to be delivered from a specific threat. Do they reflect a temple ceremony or are they purely literary compositions? Individual thanksgivings such as Psalms 30 and 34, and songs of trust such as Psalms 27:1-6 and 91 might reflect private transactions between a temple official and an individual or family. Perhaps people sought the help of such officials to ritualize a particular sorrow or joy.

### Types or Genres of the Psalms

The most efficient way to show new readers how the psalms functioned as prayers is to describe the main types or genres. Purely on the basis of their form, more than eighty psalms fall into one of three types: hymn, individual and community "lament" (petition), and thanksgiving. About thirty more can be grouped together according to their subject as festival songs and liturgies. According to style or tone, other psalms are reckoned songs of trust (e.g., Pss. 23, 91, 121) and wisdom psalms (e.g., Pss. 37, 49, 73). Three psalms have the Torah or law as their subject (Pss. 1, 19, 119).

#### *Hymns*

There are about twenty-eight hymns (Pss. 8, 19, 29, 33, 47, 66:1-12, 93, 95-100, 103, 104, 105, 107, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, and 145-50). The basic structure is extremely simple: a call to worship God, often naming the participants (e.g., "Praise the Lord, all you nations") and sometimes mentioning musical instruments ("Praise him with trumpet voice"). The invitatory verse is often repeated in the final verse.

The body of the poem is normally introduced by the preposition "for, because" (Hebrew *kî*), giving the basis for the praise—usually an act of

God. The German scholar Claus Westermann has pointed out that comparable hymns in Mesopotamia (today Iraq) use “descriptive praise,” that is, praising what the god customarily does or is, whereas biblical hymns use “narrative praise,”<sup>2</sup> that is, praising God for doing a particular act. The particular act is often that by which Israel came into being as a people—the exodus from Egypt and entry into Canaan. Psalms refer to this one event from either of two perspectives: by using the language of history (“historic”) with human characters prominent (e.g., Ps. 105) or by using the language of “myth” (“suprahistoric”) with God portrayed as acting directly in the world rather than through human agency (e.g., Ps. 114). Often the two perspectives are mingled in one psalm (e.g., Pss. 135, 136).

In this type of psalm, the verb “to bless” (Hebrew *bē’rak*) has a different range of meaning than “bless” in English. In the Bible, God blesses human beings and human beings bless God. God’s blessing gives to human beings what they need but do not possess—health, wealth, honor, children. But how can human beings bless God who possesses all things? They give the only thing God might lack—recognition by human beings of his unique glory and power. People bless God by acknowledging before others his benefits to them, thus widening the circle of his worshippers.

### *Individual Lament*

“Lament” is the modern term for the genre; it is derived from one characteristic, the complaint. A more apt term is “petition,” for the purpose of the genre is to persuade God to rescue the psalmist. Individual petitions include Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9–10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7–14, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 41, 42–43, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 139, 140, 141, 142, and 143. Some scholars suggest that the original context of such psalms was a ritual dialogue between a troubled individual and a temple official, like that between Hannah and the priest Eli at the old shrine in Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:9–18). At the end of the dialogue, Eli says to Hannah, “Go in peace and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him” (1 Sam. 1:17), an assurance that enables Hannah to return home in peace. In a similar way, psalmic laments or petitions offered oppressed individuals a

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2. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1981), 30–31.

means of unburdening themselves before receiving authoritative assurances.

The genre has standard elements in a flexible sequence. Each psalm begins with an unadorned *cry to the Lord*, for example, "Help, Lord!" The *complaint* is a description of the problem or danger such as sickness, an unfair legal accusation, the treachery of former friends, or the consequences of sin such as ostracism from the community. Usually there is a *statement of trust*, uttered despite the overwhelming difficulties, for example, "I am not afraid of ten thousands of people / who have set themselves against me all around" (Ps. 3:6). The *prayer* or petition asks for rescue and sometimes also for the downfall of the enemy. Some scholars assume that at some point in the transaction between temple official and penitent, the official (like Eli to Hannah) assured the petitioner that God had heard the plea. Such pleas, being the official's part, would not have been transmitted with the psalm, though they are apparently preserved in some laments (e.g., Pss. 12:5; 60:6-8). Finally comes the statement of praise, which, because of its serenity, is in striking contrast to the unrest of the psalm.

The psalmist pursues a strategy. Each psalm portrays a drama with three actors—the psalmist, the enemies ("the wicked"), and God. The complaint portrays the psalmist as a loyal client of the Lord, who nonetheless suffers assaults from the wicked or from some threat like illness. The psalmist's claim to be just or loyal is not a claim of universal innocence or perfection but only of innocence in this case. The question is thus posed to God: Will you, just God that you are, allow your loyal client to suffer harm from an unjust enemy? Will you not, as vindicator of the poor, come to my aid? The basis of the appeal is not the character of the psalmist, but the character of God: *noblesse oblige* (a French phrase meaning "honor compels me"). The psalm enabled the worshipper to face a major threat and transform it into a situation of trust in God.

#### *Community Lament (or Petition)*

The following Psalms are commonly assigned to this genre: 44, 60, 74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, and 126. The community complains that the Lord has abandoned them to their enemies. In response, they "remember" before God the event that brought Israel into existence in the hope that God will "reactivate" that event. The foundational event can be described in various ways, for example, transplanting a vine from Egypt (Ps. 80:8; 14) or defeating the sea and installing the people in their

land (Psalm 77). The lament aims to persuade God to act by asking the question: Will you allow another power to destroy what you have created? The genre appeals to God's character rather than to the merit of the community.

In laments, the community remembers (Hebrew *zākar*) God's past action. The verb "to remember" is an important verb in the psalter. It does not mean suddenly to bring to mind what had been forgotten but to bring up a past event and make it present by expressing it in words or gestures. Speaking it in the public liturgy, and perhaps dramatizing it as well, makes the originating event present once more before God and the community. The event is actualized in the liturgy. English translations sometimes obscure this notion of remembering. For example, compare the New Revised Standard Version of Psalm 77:13: "I will meditate on your mighty work, / and muse on your mighty deeds," and the New American Bible rendering, "I will recite all your works; / your exploits I will tell."

### *Individual Thanksgiving*

Psalms in this category include 18, 21, 30, 32, 34, 40:1-11, 92, 108, 111, 116, 118, 138. In a sense, such psalms are a continuation of the individual petition, for they tell of God's response to a lament. They report to the community how God has rescued them from the hands of the wicked. Like the hymn and the individual petition, the thanksgiving psalm is a transaction between an individual and God: You have done me a good turn by rescuing me; now I return the favor by enlarging the circle of your admirers.

The thanksgiving genre also has a characteristic word—to give thanks (Hebrew *hōdû*). It occasionally means "to confess (sin)" but ordinarily is translated into English as "to give thanks." The translation is misleading, however, for there is no exact equivalent in biblical Hebrew to the "thank you" of modern languages. How to give thanks in the Bible can be illustrated by Jacob's wife Leah, whose prayer for a son is finally answered. She responds, "This time I will praise (*'ōdeh*) the Lord" (Gen. 29:35). She praises God before others. The verbs with which "to praise" is semantically paired—to exult, sing, play an instrument—show that giving thanks involves intense emotion.

### *Other Categories*

Other psalms can be classed according to their subject matter as "historical" narratives, festival songs, and liturgies. "Historical" psalms tell

a story rather than narrate history in a modern sense. They are 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136. Modern readers can be overwhelmed by the historical details but presumably ancients would have been familiar enough with the basic outline to note variations on a basic plot. An example is Psalm 78. Despite its length and complexity, its structure guided ancient readers to its meaning. The psalm is constructed around two parallel structures (verses in parentheses):

### Introduction (1–11)

Wilderness (12–31)	Egypt to Canaan (40–64)
Gracious act (12–16)	Gracious act (40–55)
Rebellion (17–20)	Rebellion (56–58)
Divine anger and punishment (Poisoned manna and quail) (21–31)	Divine anger and punishment (Shiloh's destruction) (59–64)
Divine anger and punishment	Divine anger and punishment
Forgiveness/new beginning (32–39)	Forgiveness/new beginning (65–72)

This pattern of narrative incidents (gracious act of God, rebellion, punishment, and new divine offer) appear in each recital, letting the reader know that God does not allow the people's sin to end his work. The repeated pattern thus shows a single divine purpose at work. The people are invited to praise God's fidelity and to respond positively after the destruction of Shiloh to the new offer: the establishment of Zion and the Davidic king.

Similarly, the forty-five-verse Psalm 105 is shaped by another pattern: how the promise of land was experienced at different phases of Israel's history. Verses 1–6 invite Israel as descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to praise the Lord. Verses 7–11 identify the Lord as the God of the whole world who yet remembers that he promised land to the ancestors. The rest of the poem (vv. 12–45) shows how Israel experienced that promise in different ways before they actually accepted it as a gracious gift—the experience of the protected sojourner (vv. 12–15), a protected prisoner freed to become a teacher (vv. 16–22), a protected but oppressed minority (vv. 23–38), and a protected community in the desert on the way to take possession (vv. 39–45).

Another distinct category is the enthronement psalms, for example,



Psalms 24, 29, 47, 93, and 95-99. The Lord is enthroned as king of heaven and earth. Presumably, the psalms accompanied a liturgical rite. In the opinion of many scholars, Israel celebrated a New Year festival just as the fall rains began to make the earth fertile again. (The Israelite agricultural year had only two seasons: the infertile season of dryness from late April to early September, and the fertile season of moisture from late September to mid-April.) At this time, the Lord would have been enthroned as king and lord of the rains, who defeated cosmic chaos. Enthronement psalms do not, of course, presuppose that the Lord had been previously dethroned any more than the Christian Easter presupposes that Jesus has not been raised from the dead. Rather, the Lord's kingship is renewed and experienced afresh as the world seems to come back to life in the fall after the heat and inertia of summer. Psalm 95, for example, invites Israel to enter the temple precincts and acclaim the Lord as king over the universe, "for he made it." The creation of the world was often imagined as a cosmic conflict in which the Lord defeats chaotic forces.

Related to enthronement psalms are the royal psalms (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 144:1-11) and the songs of Zion (46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 121, 122). When the divine king was enthroned as king of the world, his delegate on earth, the Davidic king, was also celebrated as the Lord's "son" and anointed, for example, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill. . . . You are my son; / today I have begotten you" (2:6-7). The quotation links the king to Mount Zion, a traditional name for Jerusalem. The Zion songs celebrate Zion as a towering mountain, the residence of the Most High God, and as a place so secure that enemy kings can only rant helplessly at its base (46:2-3; 48:4-8).

Different from the public nature of the previous categories is the "Song of Trust," which, though a bit vague as a description, is nearest to the individual lament. The genre includes Psalms 11, 16, 23, 27:1-6, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, and 131. These psalms contain references to such liturgical actions as sacrifices (4:5) and sojourning in the Lord's tent (27:4-6) but these concrete actions have become symbols to express being near God.

Another category is Torah (law or teaching) psalms (1, 19, 119), in which the psalmist rejoices in the divinely inspired written word. That word enables people to live loyal to God amid tribulations and temptations. "Word" or "law" in these texts later came to be identified with the law of Moses that was so prominent a feature of early Judaism, but originally the reference was to God's word in a more general sense.

The last category and vaguest category is that of wisdom psalms, sometimes called “learned psalmography” or noncultic meditations. Psalms 37, 49, 73, 112, and 127 (sometimes others) are usually included in this grouping. They contain stylistic or thematic similarities to wisdom literature (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and, in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox canon, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon). Stylistic similarities include phraseology such as “Happy the one . . .” (Ps. 1:1), “better than” sayings (Ps. 37:16), and admonitions (Ps. 49:16). Thematic similarities include contrasts between the two ways (Ps. 49) and preoccupation with retribution (Ps. 73).

Some psalms do not fit these genres and categories or fit more than one. On the whole, however, the psalms are ruled by certain conventions, and the reader’s understanding is greatly enhanced by knowing those conventions.

### Poetic and Rhetorical Features

The psalms are first and foremost poems and make their statement with poetic logic and beauty. The most distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism of lines, for example:

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (51:7)

Scholars give different explanations for this subtle feature. Some see in both the A and the B lines a unity of which each is less than half; the final meaning is released only at the conclusion. Other scholars explain the feature by the catch phrase “A is so, and what’s more B.” In any event, Hebrew poetry makes its statement dynamically and dialectically.<sup>3</sup>

The poet-authors of the Psalms used other techniques as well. There is no regular rhyme as in English, though the plural ending – *'im* and pronoun suffixes of nouns and verbs often produce a rhyming sound. Another feature is using an abstract figure as a concrete one; for example:

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;  
evil will not dwell with you.  
The boastful will not stand before your eyes;

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3. It is a remarkable fact that this key feature of Hebrew poetry can be perfectly translated into other languages.

you hate all evildoers. (5:4)

The first two-line verse uses abstract nouns (“wickedness” and “evil”) for concrete nouns (wicked and evil persons); the verbs “to delight in” and “to dwell, sojourn” are appropriate for human beings rather than abstract nouns. The second line treats “evil” as “evil persons” for the subject of the verb. The poet has in mind embodied evil. The poetic device of using abstractions as concrete figures is important because the curses (and blessings) that the psalmists wish upon others can be against evil as such rather than against specific human beings.

### The Perspective of the Psalter

Israel’s neighbors in the ancient Near East also used liturgical poetry. Each temple had rituals and ceremonies using the spoken and sung word in hymns, petitions, and thanksgivings. What made Israel distinctive in that world was its belief in *one* God, invoked as “Yahweh.” (At some point in early Judaism, the title “Lord” was substituted out of reverence for the proper name Yahweh and this usage has continued among both Christians and Jews.) Yahweh, the Lord, shaped all and hence is at the center of every psalm.

Monotheism made Israel’s worship distinctive. The Lord, all-powerful and all-knowing, did not require human beings’ labor and care as other deities did. Genesis 1 puts human beings at the intersection between heaven and earth. They are at once part of creation and the only creatures able to address God in word and music; they are by their nature singers before God. As Claus Westermann has remarked, “Humans are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship to God.”<sup>4</sup>

Israel’s monotheistic faith forbade images, which in ancient religion were an ordinary means of encountering deity. In the biblical perspective, no image could adequately represent the one Lord of *all* the world. In the absence of images, the word has the role of bringing Israel before the Lord. That is why the Psalms are so important.

### Representative Psalms

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4. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1984), 158.

A good way to understand the psalms is to look at examples of the main types—the hymn, individual lament (petition), and thanksgiving. We will conclude with everyone's favorite, Psalm 23.

*The Hymn: Psalm 100, A Psalm of Praise*

Raise a shout to the Lord, all the earth.  
 Worship the Lord with joyous sound;  
 enter his presence with a song.  
 Acknowledge that the Lord is God.  
 He that made us and we are  
     his people, the flock he pastures.  
 Enter his gates with praise,  
     his courts with acclamation.  
 Give thanks to him, bless his name.  
 For the Lord is good;  
     his steadfastness is eternal,  
     and his faithfulness to all generations.

Many English translations call the poem a "thanksgiving"; but as we have seen, in the Bible to give thanks is to tell what the other person has done for us. Hence, "praise" is the right word. The structure of the hymn is simple: a call to worship, often with the invited party named; the main section gives the basis for the praise (some action of God), which is introduced by the preposition "for."

This hymn invites everyone on earth to enter the temple courts and shout out praise to the Lord and acknowledge him as God and Israel as the people he created. Israel itself is the "deed" God has done. The nations will sense something of God's fidelity and power by looking at the fortunes of his favored people Israel. "For" in v. 5 introduces the basis of the praise: God is generous and his fidelity to Israel knows no interruption.

An example of an *individual lament* is Psalm 3, which is not reprinted here because of its length. As befits urgent need, it begins abruptly ("O Lord") followed by the complaint (2-3). "Many" (repeated three times in two verses) are rising against the psalmist, declaring that their prey has no "help" in God (3). The psalmist quotes the enemies' words to remind God they are not only the psalmist's enemies but God's as well.

In vv. 4-5, the psalmist uses three of the Lord's titles, all of them

concerned with rescue from danger: “shield,” “(restorer of) my dignity (or glory),” “lifter of my head.” How differently from the enemies does the psalmist see God! Verses 6–7 tell how the psalmist has experienced God as faithful in the past: Praying in the temple always elicits a divine response (5); lying down to sleep always ends with the psalmist waking safely (6). The psalmist therefore does not collapse before “ten thousands,” remaining instead the perfect child of God—loyal and expectant of divine mercy and power.

The petition in v. 8 is succinct. “Rise up” alludes to the enemies’ rising up in v. 2. “O Lord” reprises the invocations of vv. 2 and 4. “Deliver me” picks up the trilateral root in “help” in v. 3 and “deliverance” in v. 9. The phrase “my God” reverses the enemies’ use of “God” in v. 3. The last verse puts entirely in God’s hands the timetable and mode of rescue, asking only for blessings upon the psalmist and Israel. Such laments enabled petitioners to express fully and honestly their vulnerability and their faith in God.

An example of a *thanksgiving* is Psalm 32. In essence, a thanksgiving is the report of a rescue to other people (often called “the many” or “you”). Burdened with “guilt,” which here is not so much interior anguish as the social consequences of one’s foolish behavior, the psalmist declares, “Happy the one whose transgression is removed, / whose sin is forgiven.” Verses 3–4 describe past anguish. Verses 5–7 describe the next steps—the psalmist opening up to the Lord and the happy result of being forgiven. The experience of being forgiven is so powerful that the psalmist must share it with others, becoming a teacher (vv. 8–11). The only way to find genuine happiness and joy is to open oneself up to the transforming love of God.

*A Song of Trust: Psalm 23, A Song of David*

The Lord is my shepherd,  
 I shall not be in want.  
 He lets me graze in green pastures;  
 he leads me to still waters.  
 He satisfies my appetite.  
 He leads me along the right path  
 for the sake of his name.  
 Even when I walk in a dark valley,  
 I do not fear harm,

For you are with me  
your rod and your staff give me courage.  
You set a table for me  
while my enemies look on.  
You anoint my head with oil,  
my cup is full.  
Only goodness and love shall follow me  
all the days of my life.  
I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
for years to come.

This poem combines in a unique manner the personal experience of being cared for by a loving God with the national experience of the exodus from Egypt and entry into the Promised Land. Psalm 78:52-55 speaks of God guiding Israel through the wilderness to the shrine like a shepherd guiding his flock. It is open both to an intimate and a national reading. "Shepherd" is an ancient and formal term for "king," used especially when the king's care for the poor was being expressed. Here, the psalmist speaks as one of the flock, maintaining the metaphor through v. 4. The shift in v. 5 from third to second person and the mention of "table" signals new imagery, that of a meal hosted by the Lord. The Lord admits the psalmist to a sacred meal; the psalmist's enemies have been judged unworthy of entry because of their wickedness (v. 5) and must remain outside. The rich feast is a harbinger of future favor from the Lord (v. 6).

### Conclusion

I hope that the foregoing discussion, though of necessity summary in its nature, has indicated the luster and complexity of the psalter. Although the psalms are unified by recurring patterns of poetic form and meaning, conscientious readers are impressed by the diversity that exists among them. Furthermore, they are masterpieces of devotion. Few other religious texts can match their apt and eloquent expression of praise, gratitude, and supplication. Unquestionably, these brief, evocative poems have enriched, and will continue to enrich, the lives of untold numbers of worshippers.