

Ultimately, it may not matter whether the editors and copyists of the stories in Daniel believed that they were true. For the stories exist mainly to illustrate an attitude about living as a Jew: be pious, and even if threatened you will ultimately be saved—to enjoy a better fate than your non-Jewish adversaries.<sup>21</sup> In the words of Daniel 6:29: “Thus Daniel prospered . . .” But this is only half the story—the other half concerns glorification of the God of Israel, who is a great and saving God. Thus Jews are Jews for good reason.

Did these stories originate in the Diaspora, and thus illustrate that God saves even outside of the land of Israel? Or did they originate in Israel during the persecutions of Antiochus, and thus illustrate reasons for hope during a dark time? The historical-critical method has not answered this question decisively. No matter how we resolve such issues, the message of the stories in Daniel is what is important. What we notice most is how the stories in this book reinforce each other, and how effectively they convey their belief that God would reward and protect piety.

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## Prayer of Many Hearts

### Reading Psalms

*Primary Reading:* 1 Samuel 1–2; Psalms 1, 3, 6, 14, 15, 24, 53, 118.

### What Is Psalms?

The English title “Psalms” comes to us from the Septuagint, the venerable Jewish translation of the Bible into Greek. It rendered the word *mizmor* (מִזְמוֹר), which features in many superscriptions (chapter titles) in this book, as *psalmos*. Both the Hebrew and Greek words mean “a song sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument.” In other words, this book consists of song lyrics—about 150 separate songs (largely, but not exactly, identical with the chapter headings). Many of them strike us as familiar, either because of their important role in contemporary religious life, or because we have encountered them as classics of world literature (e.g., “The LORD is my shepherd . . .”; Ps. 23). A “psalm” is a poetic prayer composition that is not necessarily in the Book of Psalms, although that book contains most of the known psalms.

Psalms is an unusually intimidating book. Weighing in at 150 chapters, it is easily the longest book of the Bible. The poetry of its lyrics is rarely straightforward. Its superscriptions are usually obscure or ambiguous. Time and again, upon even a cursory reading, we encounter sudden shifts in tone and focus—often within the same psalm—which compounds the challenge that this book poses.

How are we to read the individual psalms? How are we to understand the book as a whole? Here I do not mean “read” as an act of contemporary personal devotion; that may be important to many of us, but it is not the task at hand. Rather, the historian’s role is to view this book and its elements in terms of the ancient milieu in which they arose.

The present chapter will show that Psalms is an ordered collection of col-

lections, comprising different genres from various places and times. To establish this claim, the best place to begin is outside of Psalms—specifically, at the beginning of 1 Samuel, which contains two prayers: one in prose, the other in poetry. The poem is one of those psalms that the Book of Psalms did not incorporate.<sup>1</sup>

### Prayer in the Bible: What Samuel Teaches Us

The first prayer found in Samuel is that of Hannah, who had been desperately wanting a (male) child. She prayed:

O LORD of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the LORD for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head (1 Sam. 1:11).

Like almost one hundred other biblical prayers, this one is prose.<sup>2</sup> (It lacks parallelism and figuration, and it employs plain language.) Its three-part structure is clear: an invocation of God, a long request, and a motivation—why God should heed this request). The following table shows these elements:<sup>3</sup>

Invocation	“O LORD of Hosts”
Request	“if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child”
Motivation	“I will dedicate him to the LORD for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.”

Stated differently, after calling upon God (perhaps getting His attention), this prayer offers a deal. Hannah says that if God gives her a child, she will return it to God. The reason why Hannah would want this deal is quite clear from biblical conceptions of biology: if she has one child, then her womb has been opened by God (Gen. 29:31; 30:22), and she will be able to have more children (see 1 Sam. 2:21). One could imagine someone in Hannah’s situation coming to the local temple and spontaneously composing such a prayer.

Altogether different is Hannah’s second prayer. After she gives birth to a son, weans him, and brings him to the sanctuary,<sup>4</sup> she prays:

(1 Sam. 2:1) My heart exults in the LORD; / I have triumphed through the LORD. / I gloat over my enemies; / I rejoice in Your deliverance. / (2) There is no holy one like the LORD, / Truly, there is none beside You; /

There is no rock like our God. / (3) Talk no more with lofty pride, / Let no arrogance cross your lips! / For the LORD is an all-knowing God; / By Him actions are measured. / (4) The bows of the mighty are broken, / And the faltering are girded with strength. / (5) Men once sated must hire out for bread; / Men once hungry hunger no more. / While the barren woman bears seven, / The mother of many is forlorn. / (6) The LORD deals death and gives life, / Casts down into Sheol and raises up. / (7) The LORD makes poor and makes rich; / He casts down, He also lifts high. / (8) He raises the poor from the dust, / Lifts up the needy from the dunghill, / Setting them with nobles, / Granting them seats of honor. / For the pillars of the earth are the LORD’s; / He has set the world upon them. / (9) He guards the steps of His faithful, / But the wicked perish in darkness— / For not by strength shall man prevail. / (10) The foes of the LORD shall be shattered; / He will thunder against them in the heavens. / The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. / He will give power to His king, / And triumph to His anointed one.

This prayer of thanksgiving is clearly in poetry. It has the characteristic features of biblical poetry that we discussed in chapter 17: binary lines, parallel structure, and figurative language.<sup>5</sup> If we lifted this text from its context in the narrative, we would read it as a royal psalm of thanksgiving after a military victory. Not only is it full of war language (see esp. vv. 4 and 10), but also it refers outright to the king (v. 10). This is quite strange, since at this point in Israel’s history, the monarchy has not yet been established.

Stated differently, the Hannah portrayed in Samuel could not have recited this psalm, which dates from the monarchic period. But the biblical editors were not stupid. So how could one of them have thought to insert this psalm into Hannah’s mouth?

Our psalm’s presence in its current location shows us that the editor expected the Israelite audience to find it plausible that a woman whose deepest wish had come true would respond by reciting such a psalm. In other words, the Israelites customarily prayed using ready-made psalms. Why did they do so? Probably because they believed such poems to be both movingly beautiful and traditional—that is, proven to be efficacious.

As an Israelite woman visiting the sanctuary, how would Hannah have come to recite this particular psalm? As the person who had come to pray, she would have asked an official (such as a priest) for the most relevant psalm available. Perhaps because the Israelites did not have “off-the-rack” prayers for special occasions in women’s lives, the official would have chosen this psalm because it contains a reference to a barren woman who gives birth (v. 5). Furthermore, it

celebrates victory over an enemy—a reversal of fortune—which Hannah could relate to her rivalry with Peninnah, her husband's other wife. One can imagine Hannah then reciting this off-the-rack prayer, repeating each phrase after the priest, resonating with the parts concerning children and rivalries—reciting these verses with verve, while mumbling through the rest.

Thus I have accounted for how a royal psalm of victory ended up in Hannah's mouth. That explanation, in turn, sheds light on the nature of the Book of Psalms: That book comprised poetic selections from which worshippers could find something relevant when they felt the need for formal, poetic, traditional language.

### When, Where, and Why

As we have seen in earlier chapters, we must first identify a work's literary genre and social setting (what scholars call the *Sitz im Leben*) before we can read it correctly. This is quite difficult for psalms, most of which contain only obscure hints at their background. For example, Psalm 118:27 contains the ritual instruction "bind the festal offering to the horns of the altar with cords," so we know that worshippers (or perhaps Levites) recited this psalm during the sacrifice of a festival offering. But most psalms are silent about which particular rituals, if any, they are associated. Most ritual texts, in turn, are silent about their connections to particular psalms.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, discerning the social setting of psalms involves a lot of guessing. Such speculation is useful, however, if it helps guide us toward the ancient meaning of psalms.

Psalm 6 reads:

(1) For the leader; with instrumental music on the *sheminith*. A psalm of David. (2) O LORD, do not punish me in anger, / do not chastise me in fury. / (3) Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I languish; / heal me, O LORD, for my bones shake with terror. / (4) My whole being is stricken with terror, / while You, LORD—O, how long! / (5) O LORD, turn! Rescue me! / Deliver me as befits Your faithfulness. / (6) For there is no praise of You among the dead; / in Sheol, who can acclaim You? / (7) I am weary with groaning; / every night I drench my bed, / I melt my couch in tears. / (8) My eyes are wasted by vexation, / worn out because of all my foes. / (9) Away from me, all you evildoers, / for the LORD has heeded the sound of my weeping. / (10) The LORD has heeded my plea, / the LORD will accept my prayer. / (11) All my enemies will be frustrated and

stricken with terror; / they will turn back in an instant, frustrated (transl. adapted).

In terms of its structure and elements, this psalm resembles Hannah's prose prayer in 1 Samuel 1: invocation of God, requests, and motivations (why God should heed this prayer).

Invocation	"O LORD" (v. 2)
Requests	"do not punish me . . . do not chastise me. . . . Have mercy on me . . . ; heal me . . . rescue me . . . deliver me" (vv. 2–5)
Motivations	"as befits Your faithfulness. For there is no praise of You among the dead; in Sheol, who can acclaim You? I am weary with groaning; every night I drench my bed, I melt my couch in tears. My eyes are wasted by vexation, worn out because of all my foes" (vv. 5–8)

The psalms' expressed motivations give us insight into how the ancient Israelites understood what would move or satisfy God. In this case, for example, the poet assumes that God enjoys praise. Indeed, the speaker almost threatens God by pointing out that (to paraphrase v. 6) "if You let my enemies kill me, there will be one less person around to praise You!"

### Assigning a Genre

Many psalms share the triad of elements found here—invocation, requests, and motivation. Biblical scholars have classed such psalms under the genre of "petitions." Because those psalms often begin with complaints or laments, some scholars refer to them as "complaints" or "laments."<sup>7</sup> Sometimes their grammar suggests that individuals recited them, while other psalms couch their language in the plural. Thus scholars subdivide the class of laments into "individual" and "communal" types.

Each genre of psalm follows a convention—a script or form that was engrained in the culture. (In our culture, too, we have certain conventions for writing a personal letter versus a business letter; each type of composition has its own conventions.) For example, Psalm 22, featured in Christian tradition, opens with "My God, my God," which immediately leads into "why have You abandoned me; / why so far from delivering me / and from my anguished roaring?" (v. 2). The psalm proceeds to present many motivations for why God

should listen, including "I became Your charge at birth; / from my mother's womb You have been my God" (v. 11), and "Then will I proclaim Your fame to my brethren, / praise You in the congregation" (v. 23).<sup>8</sup>

### Accounting for Mood Swings

Thus far, our analysis of Psalm 6 has ignored the end: "for the LORD has heeded the sound of my weeping. / The LORD has heeded my plea, / the LORD will accept my prayer. / All my enemies, will be frustrated and stricken with terror; / they will turn back in an instant, frustrated" (vv. 9b–11; transl. adapted). These verses are puzzling partly because their grammatical tense does not seem to fit the context.<sup>9</sup> Some of the verbs seem to depict actions that are completed or are in the past ("has heeded . . . has heeded"). But how can the speaker say this, given the dire straits just described? Furthermore, the mood has shifted sharply and inexplicably.

Such a dramatic change in the mood of a psalm is actually frequent—which of course only heightens the problem. It is found, for example, in the lament of Psalm 3, where there is movement from "O LORD, my foes are so many! / Many are those who attack me" (v. 2) to "I have no fear of the myriad forces / arrayed against me on every side. . . . For You Have slapped all my enemies in the face; / You have broken the teeth of the wicked" (vv. 7–8; transl. adapted). Seeing both a change of tense and the sudden sprouting of confidence in many laments raises the question that form-criticism addresses: What social setting (*Sitz im Leben*) can explain this mood swing?

Form-criticism often asks great questions that it cannot answer decisively. Thus, we cannot identify with certainty the social setting of petitions that contain the confidence motif that we have just described. Many form-critics suggest that worshippers used to recite these psalms in a temple, where an individual (whom the scholars often call a "cultic prophet"<sup>10</sup>) heard each complaint and then let the petitioner know whether God was sympathetic. After having been told that God heeded the lament, the petitioner would recite the lines expressing confidence (such as "for the LORD has heeded the sound of my weeping. / The LORD has heeded my plea, / the LORD will accept my prayer"; 6:9b–10).<sup>11</sup> That reconstruction of certain psalms' ritual setting finds some support from biblical passages that describe a dialogue with God. One verse that may allude to such a ritual exchange is "You have ever drawn nigh when I called You; / You have said, 'Do not fear!'" (Lam. 3:57).

### Several Genres in Psalms

We have looked carefully at a few psalms so as to posit their genres. This has helped us to understand the psalm within the larger genre of which it seems to partake. So far we have discussed two genres: the hymn (Hannah's song) and the petition (Pss. 3, 6, and 22). Another genre is the "entrance liturgy," apparently recited by the worshipper who is about to enter the Temple precincts. For example, Psalm 15 begins "LORD, who may sojourn in Your tent, / who may dwell on Your holy mountain? / He who lives without blame . . ." Part of Psalm 24 shares the same genre: "Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? / Who may stand in His holy place?— / He who has clean hands and a pure heart . . ." (vv. 3–4).<sup>12</sup>

Again, no explicit ritual text in Leviticus or Kings mentions such a liturgy. Rather, our attempt to explain these psalms and their structure is what motivates the reconstruction. The reconstruction, in turn, helps us read and understand the psalm better. Certainly, this is somewhat circular: We must always remember that we are following textual clues, and we must always ask: Is there a different social setting that would better explain the psalm within its ancient context?

### Time and Place

Reconstructing the social setting answers the question of "why" someone composed the psalms. In the same way—based on textual clues—we can often reconstruct when and where they were written. In so doing, we cannot take literally the tradition that ascribes the book's authorship to King David. The book itself does not make this claim; the superscriptions seem to attribute less than half of the psalms to David. Many psalms attribute their origin to other figures, such as the two attributed to Solomon (72, 127), and the twelve each to Asaph (50, 73–83) and to the sons of Korah (42–49, 84, 85, 87, 88). Even the superscriptions that do say "Of David. A psalm" or "A Psalm of David" may not mean to attribute authorship to him. Rather, such formulas may mean "a psalm in the style of David."<sup>13</sup>

Looking beyond the superscriptions gives us further clues for dating the psalms. The language of the "Davidic psalms" makes clear that they are not all from the same period, and none of them reflects the early-tenth-century Hebrew that he would have spoken. In fact, the opening of Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon, / there we sat," indicates that the psalm comes from the postexilic period—four hundred years after David's time. Other psalms contain postexilic

phrases or words. Thus the tradition that developed in the Synagogue and the Church that attributed (much of) the book to David is incorrect.<sup>14</sup> The Psalter clearly has a long history, from the First through the (early) Second Temple period.

Scholars agree that most psalms are connected to the Jerusalem Temple. Even so, some of these poems clearly originated elsewhere. For example, Psalm 80 contains internal hints that its origin lay in the Northern Kingdom: "Give ear, O shepherd of Israel / who leads Joseph like a flock! / Appear, You who are enthroned on the cherubim, / at the head of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh! / Rouse Your might and come to our help!" (vv. 2–3). This passage invokes God as the leader of the *northern* tribes. Some scholars have defined several psalms as Northern on the basis of their dialect, since we know from archaeological evidence that Northern Hebrew was different than Judean Hebrew.<sup>15</sup> In sum, the psalms preserved in Psalms reflect a wide variety of settings, dates, and places of origin.

## A Collection of Collections

We have established that the Book of Psalms came together over a long period of time. Further evidence comes from the notation about halfway through the book, "End of the prayers of David son of Jesse" (72:20), which must mark the conclusion of an earlier edition of the Psalter. The book's development over time has left traces in its present structure. Compare Psalms 14 and 53:

<i>Psalm 14</i>	<i>Psalm 53</i>
(1) For the leader. Of David. The benighted man thinks, "God does not care." Man's deeds are corrupt and loathsome; no one does good.	(1) For the leader; on <i>mahalath</i> . A <i>maskil</i> of David.
(2) The LORD looks down from heaven on mankind to find a man of understanding, a man mindful of God.	(2) The benighted man thinks, "God does not care." Man's wrongdoing is corrupt and loathsome; no one does good.
(3) All have turned bad, altogether foul; there is none who does good, not even one.	(3) God looks down from heaven on mankind to find a man of understanding, a man mindful of God.
(4) Are they so witless, all those	(4) Everyone is dross, altogether foul; there is none who does good, not even one.

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| <p>evildoers, who devour my people<br/>as they devour food, and do not<br/>invoke the LORD?</p> <p>(5) There they will be seized with<br/>fright, for God is present in the<br/>circle of the righteous.</p> <p>(6) You may set at naught the counsel<br/>of the lowly, but the LORD is his<br/>refuge.</p> <p>(7) O that the deliverance of Israel<br/>might come from Zion! When the<br/>LORD restores the fortunes of His<br/>people, Jacob will exult, Israel<br/>will rejoice.</p> | <p>(5) Are they so witless, those<br/>evildoers, who devour my people<br/>as they devour food, and do not<br/>invoke God?</p> <p>(6) There they will be seized with<br/>fright—never was there such a<br/>fright—for God has scattered the<br/>bones of your besiegers; you<br/>have put them to shame, for God<br/>has rejected them.</p> <p>(7) O that the deliverance of Israel<br/>might come from Zion! When<br/>God restores the fortunes of His<br/>people, Jacob will exult, Israel<br/>will rejoice.</p> |
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Clearly this is a single psalm, preserved in two slightly different versions. The discrepancies result from changes and errors during textual transmission. A single editor probably would not have included both versions. More likely, each psalm already existed in two different collections. Later, an editor of the Psalter apparently incorporated both collections. In other words, Psalms is a *collection of collections*.

Further evidence that Psalms 14 and 53 came from two separate collections is the language employed to refer to the Deity. The last two verses of Psalm 14 consistently use *YHWH* ("the LORD"), whereas the same verses in Psalm 53 use *Elohim* ("God"). If we step back from these two psalms, we can see a larger pattern: Psalms 48–83 form a collection that, compared to the rest of the Psalter, prefers to employ *Elohim*. The difference in the relative use of these names is striking:

Psalms 48–83:	<i>Elohim</i> , 210 times; <i>YHWH</i> , 45 times
Rest of the Psalter:	<i>Elohim</i> , 94 times; <i>YHWH</i> , 584 times

On the basis of this comparison, scholars consider chapters 48–83 to be a collection in its own right, which they call the "Elohistic Psalter," since it relies upon the name *Elohim*.

We can spot other collections as well. For example, Psalms 120–134 all begin with "A Song of Ascents" or a similar formula. (We are no longer sure what a Song of Ascent is.<sup>16</sup>) Psalms 73–83, whose superscriptions attribute them to

Asaph, once formed a separate collection. (Psalm 50 has a similar attribution, but it is now in a different part of the book.) The final five psalms begin with "Hallelujah!" In sum, we can be quite certain that the Psalter comprises a collection of collections.

### Psalms as an Orderly Book

Given the evidence surveyed in the previous section, perhaps Psalms is not really a book at all; it would seem to be a hodge-podge. We can no longer determine why each psalm is in its place. Even so, we can discern some general principles of ordering for Psalms. That order is sufficient to consider Psalms a true book.<sup>17</sup>

On the simplest level of organization, we see that the laments predominate at the beginning of the Psalter, whereas the hymns appear mostly at its end. Thus, Psalms moves from complaint to thanksgiving, from being troubled to being joyful. That is a common biblical structure, as in prophetic books that begin with rebuke and end with consolation (see esp. Ezekiel).

The structure of Psalms is more complex as well. A formula that praises God (what scholars call a "doxology") occurs four times, with only slight variation:

Blessed is the LORD, God of Israel, / from eternity to eternity. / Amen and Amen. (41:14)

Blessed is His glorious name forever; / His glory fills the whole world. / Amen and Amen. / End of the prayers of David son of Jesse. (72:19–20)

Blessed is the LORD forever; / Amen and Amen. (89:53)

Blessed is the LORD, God of Israel, / From eternity to eternity. / Let all the people say, "Amen." / Hallelujah. (106:48)

Functionally speaking, these formulas divide the book into five parts. Linguistic and contextual evidence suggests that these formulas are not an original part of the book. In other words, a later editor inserted them so as to create a five-part composition.

The book's conclusion reinforces that five-part structure, for it exuberantly underscores the earlier praise formulas (we might call it a "megadoxology"):

(150:1) Hallelujah. Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in the sky, His stronghold. (2) Praise Him for His mighty acts; praise Him for His exceeding greatness. (3) Praise Him with blasts of the horn; praise Him

with harp and lyre. (4) Praise Him with timbrel and dance; praise Him with lute and pipe. (5) Praise Him with resounding cymbals; praise Him with loud-clashing cymbals. (6) Let all that breathes praise the LORD. Hallelujah.

What is the purpose of this five-part division? Psalms tells us at its very beginning. Possibly the same editor who added the five doxologies also placed Psalm 1 as an introduction to the Psalter. It speaks of the righteous person for whom "the Torah of the LORD is his delight, and he studies that Torah day and night" (v. 2).

As an orientation to the book, that verse accomplishes two things. First, here—at the start of Kethuvim—the third major portion of the Hebrew Bible—it asserts the primacy of the Torah. Of the three parts of the Bible, the Torah is the first among equals (scholars use the Latin expression *primus inter pares*). It is the only portion that gets mentioned at the beginning of the other two.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, the approbation for studying "Torah" in v. 2 is actually double-voiced. That is, the righteous person is supposed to study not only the Five Books of Moses but also this second "Torah," the five-part Book of Psalms. If so, then the editor who created the five-part structure headed by Psalm 1 offered us an amazing rereading of the Book of Psalms. It is not merely a compilation of old poems for worshippers to recite as prayers. Rather, it is now a book—something to be studied.