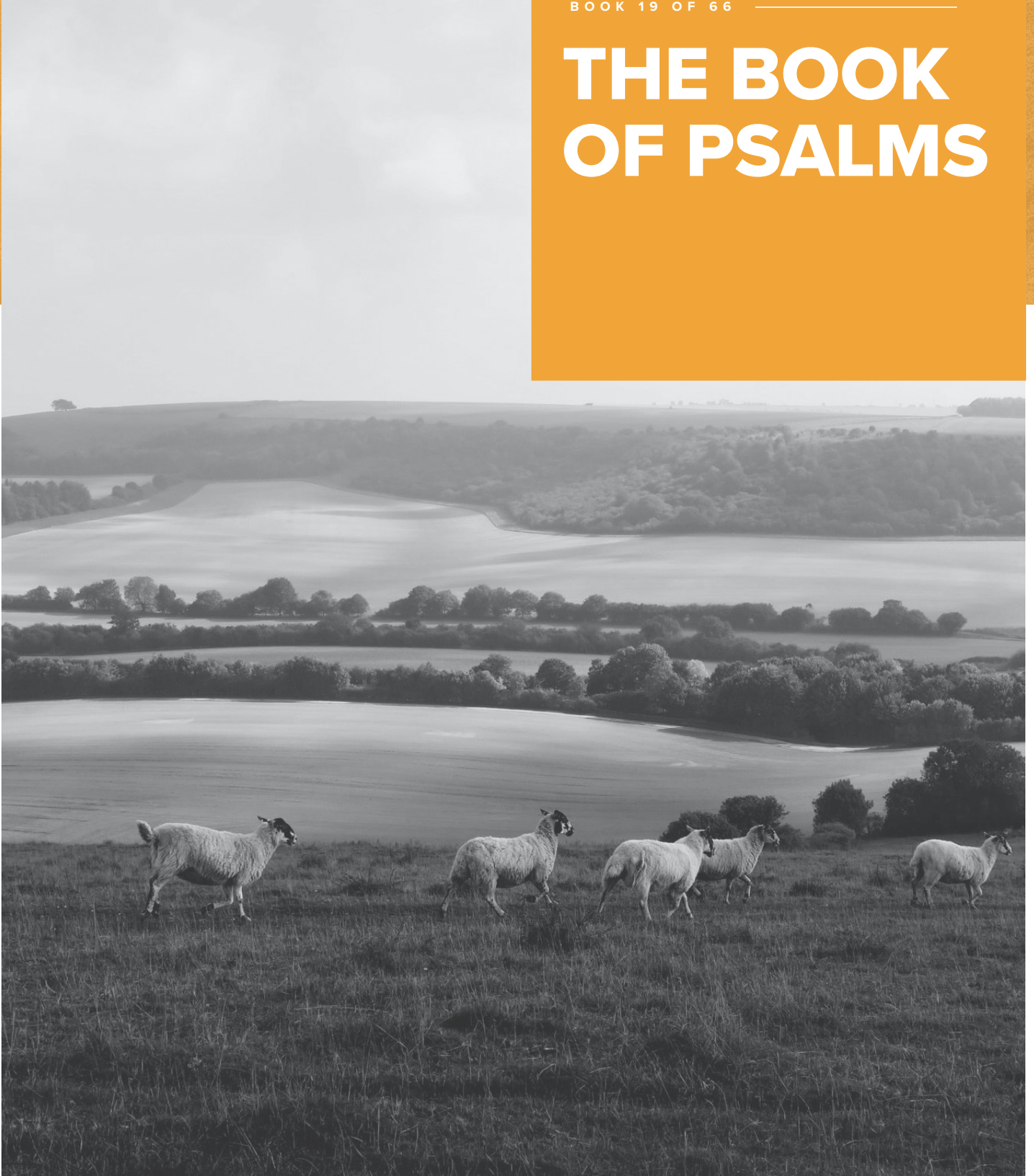




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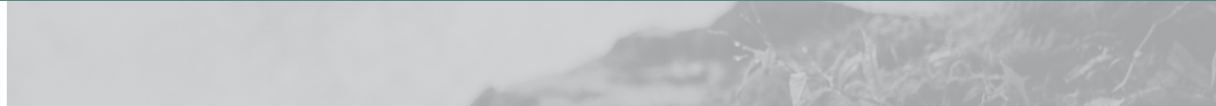
# THE BOOK OF PSALMS





## WHO IS THE AUTHOR?

Though multiple authors composed the book of Psalms, King David is recognized as having written over half of the 150 chapters. David, Asaph, the descendants of Korah, Solomon, Ethan, Heman, and Moses are all contributing authors to the book. To Asaph are ascribed twelve Psalms; to the sons of Korah, eleven, including the eighty-eighth psalm, which is also ascribed to Heman (that being the only instance in which the name of the “son” or descendant is mentioned); and to Ethan, one. Solomon’s name appears before the seventy-second and hundred twenty-seventh psalm; and Moses’s before the ninetieth psalm.<sup>1</sup> The 150 psalms were organized into five books (Book 1: 1–41; Book 2: 42–72; Book 3: 73–89; Book 4: 90–106; Book 5: 107–150), and each of these books has its own benediction or final blessing. Some have suggested that each corresponds thematically to the first five books of the Bible—the Pentateuch. Because Book I emphasizes the themes of creation, sin and salvation, it supposedly corresponds to Genesis, which prominently displays similar themes. Furthermore, because Book II’s psalms are weighted with the theme of redemption, it is said to correspond to the book of Exodus. This arrangement connects Book III with Leviticus because of their common emphasis on the sanctuary, Book IV with Numbers because of the prominence in each of Moses and Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, and Book V with Deuteronomy because of the emphasis in each on the Word of God.<sup>2</sup>



## WHEN AND WHERE DID THE AUTHOR WRITE?

The Psalms were composed over a period of approximately 900 years, with the earliest written by Moses and the latest written by various authors after the Babylonian Captivity.<sup>3</sup> This dates the book as being written largely between the 10th and 5th centuries BC.<sup>4</sup> Psalms 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 142 (according to their superscriptions) date from the time of David's exile, seen in 1 Samuel 16–31; Psalms 18 and 60 are from the time David was under blessing (2 Sam. 1–10); and Psalms 3, 51, 63 are from when David was under wrath (2 Sam. 11–20). Psalms 7 and 30 are unclassified by precise dates (cf. 2 Sam. 21–24; for this threefold division of David's career, see chapters 22–23). The remaining 59 Davidic psalms are left without historical notices. Moses wrote the oldest psalm, 90, and the latest psalms were composed in the exile (Psalm 137) or shortly thereafter (Psalm 126). Most of the other psalms (including those that identify their authors) are written in abstract terms, without reference to specific historical incidents, so that others can use them in their worship. Therefore, it is unwise to reconstruct historical background where none is given or to overemphasize it when it is.<sup>5</sup>

## WHO WAS THE ORIGINAL AUDIENCE?

The original audience was the people of ancient Israel. The Psalter began with songs by individuals composed during unique historical circumstances. These poems were then used in the liturgical life of worshiping Israel and were later gathered into earlier collections.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 345.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Ellsworth, *Opening Up Psalms* (Leominster: Day One, 2006), 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Donald C. Stamps and Carey Huffman, *Fire Bible: New International Version* (Springfield, MO: Life Publishers International, 2007), 680.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 874.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 883.

## WHY DID THE AUTHOR WRITE?

The psalms (as Holy Spirit–inspired prayers and praises) were written to express the deep inner emotions of the human heart in relation to God. (1) Many were written as prayers to God, expressing (a) trust, love, adoration, thanksgiving, praise, and a desire for a closer relationship with God; and (b) discouragement, deep distress, fear, anxiety, humiliation, and a cry for freedom, healing, or defense from enemies. (2) Others were written as songs expressing praise, thanksgiving, and worship, celebrating who God is and the great things he has done. (3) Lastly, some psalms contain sections that are prophetic anticipations of the Messiah (that is, the Savior, the Christ).<sup>7</sup>

## WHERE DID THE AUDIENCE LIVE?

The audience (ancient Israel), their setting, and their community actually vary over the span of the 900 years that the book of Psalms was assembled. Throughout these 900 years, the audience and their communities or cities changed, experienced wars, exile, peace, transition. One can see the setting, what the audience experienced, and what their community was like in the historical summaries of the Psalms. These summaries show God’s choice of the patriarchs, the sufferings of the Israelites in Egypt, their exodus, rebellions, and calamities in the wilderness, settlement in Canaan, and backslidings and reformations.<sup>8</sup> For ancient Israelites, family and kin groups were organized around agrarian activities that provided the basic elements of daily life and generated the symbols by which the higher levels of order—the political and the cosmological spheres—were understood and represented. Despite all of ancient Israel’s changing, moving, and developing over the 900 years, the basic structure of this community is three-tiered—the ancestral or patriarchal household, the state or tribal kingdom (leaders, judges, kings), and Yahweh as the supreme Lord. God (Yahweh) is the ultimate patrimonial authority over all the Israelites, who are bound to him through covenant relationship.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Stamps and Huffman, 681.

<sup>8</sup> Jamieson and Brown, 346.

<sup>9</sup> Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: WJK, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 4–5.

<sup>10</sup> Ellsworth, 11.





## GENRE

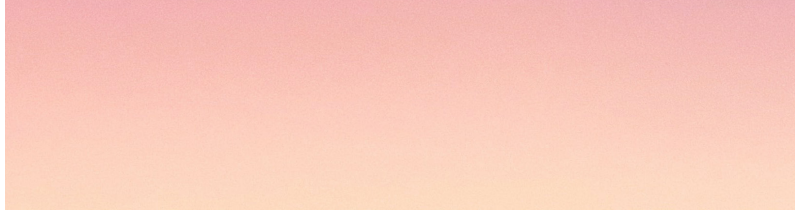
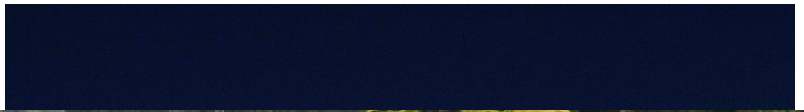
**WHAT TYPE OF BOOK IS THIS?  
WHAT ARE SOME KEY FEATURES  
OF THIS GENRE?**

The book of Psalms is considered the genre of poetry. The Hebrew title of the book means “praises.” The English title (Psalms) comes from the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Greek word psalmoi means “songs,” from which comes the idea “songs of praises” or “praise songs.” Some key features of this genre for the book of Psalms are worship, praise, and prayers. The Psalms display primarily three types of poetry: synonymous parallelism, synthetic parallelism, and ascending parallelism.<sup>10</sup>

## THEMATIC LANGUAGE

**WHAT WORDS DOES THE AUTHOR  
REGULARLY USE IN THIS BOOK?**

- Selah (used 71 times to indicate, we may presume, a pause or interlude)
- Way (13 times)
- Testimonies (23 times)
- Precepts (21 times)
- Commandments (22 times)
- Word (19 times)
- Law (25 times)
- Judgment (23 times)
- Statute (22 times)
- Word (24 times)
- Righteousness (14 times)



## KEY VERSES

### WHAT ARE SOME KEY VERSES IN THIS LETTER?

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” (19:1)

“Be still, and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world.” (46:10)

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” (103:11–12)

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (23:1–4)

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.” (118:1)

“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.” (103:8)

“Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” (91:1–2)

“The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” (27:1)

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.” (46:1–3)

“Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.” (127:1)

“Lord, what are human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them? They are like a breath; their days are like a fleeting shadow.” (144:3–4)

“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber.” (121:1–3)

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” (51:10)

## ILLUSTRATION

### WHAT'S AN ILLUSTRATION THAT WILL HELP READERS UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT AND MESSAGE OF THE BOOK?

One might compare the book of Psalms to a great concert experience. A concert showcases the artist's music, but it is the musician's relationship with the fans through the music that evokes certain emotions. These emotions touch the hearts of the fans. Each song was purposely selected and placed in a specific order to bring about the best concert experience, connection, and message for that particular artist. And in a concert multiple musicians usually play first, before the headliner takes the stage (these are called "openers"). These musicians get the crowd excited for the headliner. The openers are usually part of the same genre as the headliner, working with the headliner to bring about the message they want to convey and the best experience for the audience.

Like a concert, the book of Psalms is a compilation of worship, praise, and prayers placed in a specific order that flows seamlessly together to convey a message of the deep inner emotions of the human heart in relation to God. David might be the main headliner, and the rest of the authors would be the openers. Just like in a great concert, the multiple artists or writers of these psalms (with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) come together in unity to convey a message focusing on God, creating the best worship, praise, and prayer experience for the audience or reader that emphasizes raw human emotions and the deep connection we all have with God.

## OVERVIEW

### A SUCCINCT OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK TO INTRODUCE PSALMS TO READERS.

The book of Psalms is one of the five poetic books of the Bible. Psalms is not just a book of poetry; it is filled with praise, worship, prayers, history, and raw human emotions in relation to God.

Even though the book of Psalms was assembled over a 900-year period in ancient Israel by multiple authors (the majority having been written by King David), under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each psalm works together seamlessly with the others to convey the deep inner emotions of the human heart in relation to God. Many of the psalms were written as prayers to God to express not only trust, love, adoration, thanksgiving, praise, and a desire for a closer relationship with God, but

also fear, anxiety, humiliation, discouragement, deep distress, and a cry for healing and freedom. Other psalms were written as songs to worship God, to express all the great things God has done, and to celebrate who God is—his goodness. These psalms even allude to and prophesy about the coming Messiah (Jesus) hundreds of years before Christ's birth! So for us as the contemporary audience, let's not dismiss the vast richness found in the book of Psalms as merely a collection of feelings, or whatever we might understand poetry to be. Let us embrace how Psalms speaks and directly relates to all of us on emotional, logical, and historical levels when it comes to God and how we express ourselves in relation toward him.