

VOLUME 23

OLD TESTAMENT

THE NEW COLLEGEVILLE  
BIBLE COMMENTARY

**PSALMS 73–150**

Dianne Bergant, C.S.A.

SERIES EDITOR

Daniel Durken, O.S.B.



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

*Nihil Obstat:* Reverend Robert Harren, *Censor deputatus*.

*Imprimatur:* ✠ Most Reverend John F. Kinney, J.C.D., D.D., Bishop of St. Cloud,  
Minnesota, August 8, 2013.

Design by Ann Blattner.

Cover illustration: Detail of *Psalms Frontispiece*, Donald Jackson. © 2004 *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Photos: pages 12, 34, 56, 108, and 114, Thinkstock Photos.

Scripture texts used in this work are taken from the New American Bible, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. All Rights Reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

© 2013 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

ISBN 978-0-8146-2856-0

## **CONTENTS**

---

Abbreviations 4

### THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Introduction 5

Text and Commentary 13

Book Three (73–89) 13

Book Four (90–106) 51

Book Five (107–150) 82

Songs of Ascent (120–34) 111

Hallelujah Psalms (146–50) 143

Review Aids and Discussion Questions 150

Index of Citations from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 152

## ABBREVIATIONS

---

### Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles

Amos—Amos

Bar—Baruch

1 Chr—1 Chronicles

2 Chr—2 Chronicles

Col—Colossians

1 Cor—1 Corinthians

2 Cor—2 Corinthians

Dan—Daniel

Deut—Deuteronomy

Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes

Eph—Ephesians

Esth—Esther

Exod—Exodus

Ezek—Ezekiel

Ezra—Ezra

Gal—Galatians

Gen—Genesis

Hab—Habakkuk

Hag—Haggai

Heb—Hebrews

Hos—Hosea

Isa—Isaiah

Jas—James

Jdt—Judith

Jer—Jeremiah

Job—Job

Joel—Joel

John—John

1 John—1 John

2 John—2 John

3 John—3 John

Jonah—Jonah

Josh—Joshua

Jude—Jude

Judg—Judges

1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings

Lam—Lamentations

Lev—Leviticus

Luke—Luke

1 Macc—1 Maccabees

2 Macc—2 Maccabees

Mal—Malachi

Mark—Mark

Matt—Matthew

Mic—Micah

Nah—Nahum

Neh—Nehemiah

Num—Numbers

Obad—Obadiah

1 Pet—1 Peter

2 Pet—2 Peter

Phil—Philippians

Phlm—Philemon

Prov—Proverbs

Ps(s)—Psalms

Rev—Revelation

Rom—Romans

Ruth—Ruth

1 Sam—1 Samuel

2 Sam—2 Samuel

Sir—Sirach

Song—Song of Songs

1 Thess—1 Thessalonians

2 Thess—2 Thessalonians

1 Tim—1 Timothy

2 Tim—2 Timothy

Titus—Titus

Tob—Tobit

Wis—Wisdom

Zech—Zechariah

Zeph—Zephaniah

# *Psalms 73–150*

### **About the book**

The book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter, is really a collection of books, each of which ends with a short doxology or hymn of praise: book 1, Psalms 1–41; book 2, Psalms 42–72; book 3, Psalms 73–89; book 4, Psalms 90–106; and book 5, Psalms 107–50. The book of Psalms itself is composed of even earlier collections. Several psalms, found principally in the first book, are attributed to David. (This may account for the popular but probably not historically accurate tradition that David himself wrote most of the psalms.) Several psalms in the second and third books are ascribed to Korah or Asaph, the two great guilds of temple singers of the Second Temple period (cf. 1 Chr 6:33ff; 25:1-2). The fifth book consists of a number of songs of ascent and psalms of praise known as Hallel or the Hallelujah collection. There are also variations in the preferred name for God. *Yahweh* (rendered LORD), generally used in the first, fourth, and fifth collections, suggests an earlier “Yahwist Psalter,” while *Elohim* (God) is preferred in the second and third books, suggesting an earlier “Elohist Psalter.”

Some psalms include a superscription or an informative statement that precedes the psalm itself. This information might include identification of the earlier collection to which the psalm belonged (e.g., “A psalm of David” [Ps 3] or “A psalm of Asaph” [Ps 82]), liturgical directions (e.g., “For the leader” [Ps 68] or “On stringed instruments” [Ps 55]), lyrical classification (e.g., “A *maskil*” [Ps 54] or “A *miktam*” [Ps 59]), and a purported historical setting (e.g., “For the dedication of the temple” [Ps 30]). This information, which may have little meaning for contemporary readers, was probably included when the psalms were being collected. Since superscriptions are found in the Hebrew text, some English versions begin the numeration of the verses of the psalm with the superscription. The New American Bible Revised Edition follows this custom. Other versions begin the numeration with the first verse of the psalm itself. This explains why there is not always agreement among various translations or versions as to the number of verses in certain psalms.

## LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

The psalms are first and foremost lyrical creations, poems that are rich in metaphor and fashioned according to the patterns and techniques of ancient Israelite poetry. One of the most distinctive characteristics of this type of poetry is its parallelism. In this feature, the second half of a poetic line somehow echoes the sense of the first. Thus we read in Psalm 61:

hear	my cry, O God
listen to	my prayer

This poetic technique serves to intensify the point being made.

Another very important feature found in several psalms is the acrostic structure. In this structure the first letter of the first word of successive poetic lines follows the order of the alphabet. The structure is meant to suggest comprehensiveness, similar to the English expression “from A to Z.” Unfortunately, this alphabetic pattern is usually lost when the psalm is translated. However, identification of the acrostic or alphabetic pattern has been retained in Psalms 37, 111, 112, and 119.

A third important feature of the psalms is meter. This is a form of poetic rhythm that is determined by the number of accents in the words that comprise the line of poetry. Since this is a feature of Hebrew poetry, it is also lost in translation.

Finally, a single word, *selah*, is found in several psalms. It is probably an indication of some kind of pause, but it does not always follow the sense of the poem. Many scholars believe that it might have originally functioned as a liturgical or musical directive. However, this is not clear. Nonetheless, it has been retained in the Hebrew and so it does appear in many versions of the Psalter.

### Types of psalms

The major classifications of psalms are lament, hymn, prayers of confidence, and prayers of thanksgiving. There are also royal psalms, wisdom poems, historical recitals, ritual or liturgical, and some psalms that might fit more than one classification.

### Laments

Nearly a third of all psalms are laments. Some of them are complaints of an individual; others are communal complaints. Laments usually consist of an actual complaint, a plea for deliverance from hardship, an expression of praise of God or confidence that God will intervene and deliver the one(s)

suffering, and a promise to perform an act of devotion in gratitude for God's intervention. Some laments include an acknowledgment of guilt or a claim of innocence. Finally, there is frequently a curse hurled at the one(s) believed to be responsible for the intolerable situation that called forth the lament in the first place. Many people believe that originally the lament included several distinct religious sentiments. The first was the lament or complaint. This was followed by expressions of confidence that God would hear the complaint and remedy the situation. The lament would then end with expressions of gratitude for the divine graciousness of which the psalmist was confident. While traces of all three sentiments can still be found in some laments, the confidence and thanksgiving often comprise individual psalms.

### **Hymns**

The hymn consists of a call to praise God and an account of the wondrous acts of God that elicited the praise. These marvelous divine acts might include glories of creation or the marvelous feats performed in history on behalf of Israel. Hymns praising the Lord's kingship are a distinct group of psalms. Their focus is God's cosmic sovereignty and exclusive reign over all the heavenly bodies. Songs of Zion extol God's holy mountain, the place of God's dwelling on earth, and Jerusalem, the city built on that mountain from which God chose to rule.

### **Prayers of confidence**

Although confidence or trust is often found in laments, the Psalter also contains prayers that focus primarily on such sentiments. The motives for confidence in God's protection and care include divine justice that the people believe will be shown on their behalf, God's faithful commitment to the covenant that God chose to initiate with Israel, and the promises made to Israel's ancestors and renewed from generation to generation. As is the case with laments, there are both individual prayers of confidence and those that are communal in character.

### **Thanksgiving**

Scholars do not agree as to which psalms belong to this category because expressions of confidence and gratitude are often found in laments. Consequently, this type of psalm is usually classified according to its content rather than its form. Thanksgiving psalms are similar to hymns, in that they extol the marvelous works of God. However, hymns call forth praise because of these wonders, while thanksgiving psalms include expressions of gratitude for God's graciousness.

### **Royal psalms**

Some psalms seem to have sprung from various occasions in the life of the king. They are often referred to as “messianic psalms,” since messiah means “anointed one” and kings were anointed. On occasion, they might celebrate the king’s success in battle. However, they usually extol the special covenant relationship that God established with the king and the divine protection bestowed on the Israelite rulers because of it. Royal psalms take on new meaning when they are included in the Christian tradition and are applied to Jesus who is king par excellence and the one uniquely anointed by God. In such instances, it is not that the original psalmist had Christ in mind when composing the poem. Rather, the early Christian community began to view Christ from the perspective of the Davidic ruler and to interpret the psalm from a Christian point of view.

### **Wisdom poems**

Wisdom poems clearly differ from other psalms in both content and style. They call people to listen and to learn, not to pray. Although they do not follow a uniform style, they do possess some distinctive literary characteristics. One such characteristic is the acrostic arrangement in which the alphabet determines the initial letter of the first word of each successive line. This is recognizable only in the original Hebrew. A second characteristic is the recourse made to order in the world of nature. This order is employed as an incentive for establishing social order. One of the most prominent topics of the instruction found in these poems is the theory of retribution: the wise or good will be rewarded with happiness and prosperity while the foolish or wicked will suffer misfortune. Descriptions of situations that illustrate this teaching are intended to exhort people to live life in a way that will lead to happiness.

### **Various other psalms**

The songs of ascent, one of the early collections mentioned above, were probably sung during pilgrimages to or processions around Jerusalem and the temple. A few other psalms appear to have been composed in the style of prophetic speech. Finally, a small number of psalms defy classification. They are either historical recountings of the feats of the Lord, composites of other psalm forms, celebrations of the kingship of the Lord, or liturgical songs.

## **THE THEOLOGY IN THE PSALMS**

### **The God of Israel**

The portrait of God sketched in the psalms draws together all the characterizations of God found in the rest of the Israelite tradition. God is de-



picted as the creator of the universe and the source of all life, victoriously enthroned in heaven, yet dwelling in the city of Jerusalem. Initially believed to be exclusively Israel's liberator, God's reign was ultimately perceived as universal, and all people were invited to worship this God in Jerusalem. The God depicted in the psalms inspires both fear and confidence because of God's breathtaking divine power and majesty as well as the care and protection that God provided for Israel's ancestors in the past. This God demands compliance to the law and yet forgives infraction of it, regardless of the seriousness of the violation. Perhaps the key characterization of the Lord is that of "covenant partner." Fundamental to this understanding of God is the firm conviction that God initiated the covenant, not because Israel in any way deserved it, but because God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Pss 145:8; 103:8).

### **Humankind**

The psalms come from a society in which men are the norm and so the language and imagery reflect this gender bias. Honored as the culmination of creation, humankind is made responsible for all other living creatures. Still, humans live a fleeting life, perishing after a short life span like field flowers. The absence of a clear notion of life after death underscores the starkness of life's impermanence. Though all humans are dependent on God's providence, God seems to be the special guardian of the poor and afflicted, the defenseless widows and orphans.

### **Natural creation**

The psalms reveal a special regard for creation as the handiwork of God's power and ingenuity. Furthermore, Israel reinterpreted many ancient Near Eastern concepts of divinity, arguing that its own God is the one revealed through the elements of nature, in the exquisite design of the natural world, in the power of the thunderstorm, and in the gentleness of refreshing rain. In many psalms creation itself is called on to join in the praise of this wondrous creator-God.

### **The future**

Israel's view of the future, known as eschatology, stems from its faith in the goodness of God toward all creation. Despite the struggles that it faced throughout its history, Israel believed that the final victory would be God's. The psalms say very little about possible life beyond the grave, but they frequently mention the shadowy existence known as Sheol. This netherworld was not a place of reward or punishment, but of darkness, dust, and inactivity. Israel may not have had a clear idea of life after death, but it did not seem to believe that the dead ceased to exist. The people awaited

a final divine victory that would unfold in history, but in a history that included the cosmic realm of the heavens as well.

## **THE PSALMS TODAY**

### **Contemporary devotion**

The psalms continue to play a significant role in the official and private prayer of both the Jewish and Christian communities today. In this way they shape the minds and hearts of modern believers. One result of the various liturgical reforms of the twentieth century is that verses from a particular psalm serve as a response to the first reading. When there is a thematic connection between that first reading and the gospel passage, the responsorial psalm often acts as a prayerful summation of the readings.

Reflective reading of the psalms enables us to immerse ourselves in the religious dispositions of the psalmist. Though the sentiments with which we come to the psalms may not be identical to those expressed in those prayers, we can still recognize the world that they project. At the moment, we may not be living in a world similar to what is depicted there, and our sentiments may not correspond to the sentiments expressed by the psalmist. Most likely, however, there are people somewhere for whom those sentiments accurately express their present situation. Standing in solidarity with those people, we can make our prayer their prayer. In this way our religious consciousness can be profoundly shaped by the psalms.

### **Troublesome images**

The psalms come from worlds that are very different from those of contemporary society. They frequently reflect cultural customs and values that are foreign to us or might even offend our sensitivities. Examples of the first would be ancient patriarchal marriage practices or family customs; an example of the second would be the role that honor and shame plays in determining one's social status. In such situations it is important to discover the meaning behind the uncommon expression or figure of speech in order to appreciate its theological message. This can usually be accomplished through an examination of the historical circumstances from which the psalm originated.

There are other aspects of the psalms that many people today find offensive. Examples of these would include the male bias that is apparent in the gender-specific language used, the ethnocentrism that reveals itself in a measure of disdain for nations other than Israel, and the prejudice in presuming that physical disabilities are punishment for sin. These offensive features are not easily overlooked, but careful historical analysis can help

us realize that they are historically and culturally conditioned perspectives that need not be carried into a contemporary point of view.

What is perhaps most troublesome today in many circles is the violence that seems to enjoy divine sanction in so many of the psalms. The psalmists perceive God as a warrior who can be called on to wreak vengeance on the heads of Israel's opponents. God is called on to "crush the heads of his enemies" and then directs the people to "wash your feet in your enemy's blood" (Ps 68:22, 24). Who can comfortably pray: "Blessed the one who seizes your children / and smashes them against the rock" (Ps 137:9)? This kind of characterization of God and these kinds of directives must be carefully interpreted if we are to continue to maintain that they have revelatory value for us today.

Without in any way minimizing what is offensive, we should realize that the psalmists understand the violence that they attributed to God as a form of divine retribution. God was being called on to punish the wicked. When these wicked people were the national enemies of Israel, God was envisioned as a defending warrior, fighting on Israel's side. Since the image of a conquering god was already present in the ancient myths of creation, it is not difficult to see how such an understanding of God might be employed to describe how God acted in Israel's military history.

As is the case with all characterizations of God, the image of the divine warrior is a metaphor, a figure of speech that applies traits of one object to a second and very different object. A metaphor is never a definition, nor does it exactly parallel the two objects being compared. It simply states how these two objects have certain attributes in common. If we are to understand the metaphor of God the warrior, we will have to discover what traits traditionally attributed to the warrior are being applied to God.



# Psalms 73–150

**Third Book—Psalms 73–89**

**The Trial of the Just**

**73** <sup>1</sup>A psalm of Asaph.

How good God is to the upright,  
to those who are pure of heart!

I

<sup>2</sup>But, as for me, my feet had almost  
stumbled;  
my steps had nearly slipped,

<sup>3</sup>Because I was envious of the  
arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the  
wicked.

<sup>4</sup>For they suffer no pain;  
their bodies are healthy and  
sleek.

<sup>5</sup>They are free of the burdens of life;  
they are not afflicted like others.

<sup>6</sup>Thus pride adorns them as a  
necklace;  
violence clothes them as a robe.

---

**BOOK THREE: PSALMS 73–89**

This third book of psalms contains the major collection of psalms from the collection associated with Asaph.

***Psalm 73* (wisdom psalm)**

The psalm is difficult to classify. However, since its chief focus is the theme of retribution, many commentators consider it a wisdom psalm.

**1b God rewards the righteous**

The psalm opens stating the first half of the theory of retribution: the good will be rewarded. It is a curious opening statement for a psalm that really describes the dilemma suffered by the psalmist at the sight of the prosperity of the wicked.

**2-5 The wicked enjoy life**

The psalmist is troubled by the prosperity (the Hebrew is *shalom*) of the wicked. These wicked people should be suffering the consequences of their sinful way of living. Instead, they seem to be thriving. It is not their ungodly behavior that is coveted by the psalmist, but the apparent ease of their lives.

<sup>7</sup>Out of such blindness comes sin;  
evil thoughts flood their hearts.

<sup>8</sup>They scoff and spout their malice;  
from on high they utter threats.

<sup>9</sup>They set their mouths against the  
heavens,  
their tongues roam the earth.

<sup>10</sup>So my people turn to them  
and drink deeply of their words.

<sup>11</sup>They say, "Does God really  
know?"

"Does the Most High have any  
knowledge?"

<sup>12</sup>Such, then, are the wicked,

always carefree, increasing their  
wealth.

II

<sup>13</sup>Is it in vain that I have kept my  
heart pure,

washed my hands in innocence?

<sup>14</sup>For I am afflicted day after day,  
chastised every morning.

<sup>15</sup>Had I thought, "I will speak as  
they do,"

I would have betrayed this  
generation of your  
children.

They are healthy and free of life's cares. They do not carry the burdens that many of the innocent do. Not only do the wicked seem to prosper, but it appears that those who should be enjoying life's blessings are not. In other words, the entire theory of retribution is reversed: those who should not be happy enjoy life; those who should be happy suffer. It is this incongruity that so troubles the psalmist.

### 6-12 The arrogance of the wicked

The wicked themselves realize that the circumstances of their lives do not fit the pattern established by the theory of retribution. However, unlike the psalmist, they are not bothered by this. Rather, they delight in it. They wrap themselves in their sinfulness as they would clothe themselves in garments. Their good fortune makes them haughty. They scorn whatever in heaven or on earth might challenge them. They even defy God, maintaining that God really does not know what is happening in the world. Such blasphemy challenges one of God's fundamental attributes, namely, divine omniscience. To say that God does not know implies that God will be unable to rectify the situation. This is an indirect challenge to divine omnipotence. The circumstances of the wicked are succinctly summarized: they are free of cares, and they amass wealth.

### 13-17 The heart of the psalmist

In the face of the prosperity of the wicked, the psalmist questions the value of loyal commitment to God. If the force of retribution has been turned upside down, why struggle to be faithful? A clean or pure heart and hands washed in innocence not only refer to personal moral integrity, but also are the criteria for access to the temple and the presence of God (cf. Ps 24:3-6).

<sup>16</sup>Though I tried to understand all  
this,  
it was too difficult for me,  
<sup>17</sup>Till I entered the sanctuary of God  
and came to understand their  
end.

### III

<sup>18</sup>You set them, indeed, on a  
slippery road;  
you hurl them down to ruin.  
<sup>19</sup>How suddenly they are devastated;  
utterly undone by disaster!  
<sup>20</sup>They are like a dream after  
waking, Lord,  
dismissed like shadows when  
you arise.

### IV

<sup>21</sup>Since my heart was embittered  
and my soul deeply wounded,  
<sup>22</sup>I was stupid and could not  
understand;  
I was like a brute beast in your  
presence.  
<sup>23</sup>Yet I am always with you;  
you take hold of my right hand.  
<sup>24</sup>With your counsel you guide me,  
and at the end receive me with  
honor.  
<sup>25</sup>Whom else have I in the heavens?  
None beside you delights me on  
earth.  
<sup>26</sup>Though my flesh and my heart  
fail,

The psalmist has lived with this kind of integrity, yet has endured constant affliction. Despite this, any decision to join the ranks of the wicked is firmly rejected, because it would be a sign of betrayal of God's people. Still, like Job, the psalmist struggles to understand the incongruity of these circumstances.

Verse 17 announces a turning point in the psalmist's struggle. From a literary point of view, it also acts as a kind of hinge, connecting this struggle with insight into the ultimate end of the wicked, which is described in the verses that follow. This shift in understanding took place in the sanctuary. Hence the psalmist claims to possess the kind of integrity required for entrance into God's holy place.

## **18-20 The fate of the wicked**

The ultimate fate of the wicked is described in graphic terms. God caused them to slip and fall from prominence into ruin. This fall was not gradual. It was total, unforeseen, and compounded by all of the surprise and terror that accompanies sudden disaster. The period of the wicked's prosperity is characterized as a time when God was asleep, unaware of the inequity of the situation. But now that the Lord is awake and the ungodly have been dealt the just desserts of their sinfulness, they are like a bad dream. They have no lasting force.

## **21-28 Confidence is restored**

Personal affliction that is incomprehensible along with the apparent good fortune of the wicked left the psalmist deeply wounded and embittered and

God is the rock of my heart, my  
portion forever.  
<sup>27</sup>But those who are far from you  
perish;  
you destroy those unfaithful to  
you.  
<sup>28</sup>As for me, to be near God is my  
good,  
to make the Lord God my refuge.  
I shall declare all your works  
in the gates of daughter Zion.

### **Prayer at the Destruction of the Temple**

**74**<sup>1</sup>A *maskil* of Asaph.

I  
Why, God, have you cast us off  
forever?

Why does your anger burn  
against the sheep of your  
pasture?  
<sup>2</sup>Remember your people, whom  
you acquired of old,  
the tribe you redeemed as your  
own heritage,  
Mount Zion where you dwell.  
<sup>3</sup>Direct your steps toward the utter  
destruction,  
everything the enemy laid waste  
in the sanctuary.  
<sup>4</sup>Your foes roared triumphantly in  
the place of your assembly;  
they set up their own tokens of  
victory.  
<sup>5</sup>They hacked away like a forester  
gathering boughs,  
swinging his ax in a thicket of  
trees.

acting like a senseless brute animal. The psalmist should have known that God would eventually intervene and correct the situation. Once confidence in divine fairness is restored, the psalmist professes enduring attachment to God alone and commitment to God's guidance. God is the rock on which the psalmist finds security, the portion to which the psalmist can lay claim. Though the wicked will perish, the psalmist will remain near to God and will announce God's goodness to all who will hear.

### ***Psalms 74* (communal lament)**

#### **I-3 The lament and the prayer**

The people feel that they have been cast off and forgotten by God. In their name, the psalmist cries in lament: "Why?" What have they done to deserve this? They are God's flock, God's own people, the tribe that God brought back. Mount Zion with its sacred temple is the place where God chose to dwell. Why has God turned against them? The plea is twofold: remember this people; return to the ravaged sanctuary. "Remember" means "turn back and remedy the situation." The psalmist is certain that walking through the ruins of the temple will cause God to relent.

#### **4-9 The destruction of the sanctuary**

The enemies of God ravaged the holy place, slashing away at the wood of the shrine as if it were an overgrown grove of trees, destroying what they