

PSALM-SHAPED PRAYERFULNESS





Margaret M. Daly-Denton

Psalm-Shaped Prayerfulness
A Guide to
the Christian Reception of the Psalms

with a foreword by
Wilfrid J. Harrington OP



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When thinking about one's debt to colleagues in biblical studies and liturgy, to fellow church musicians and composers, to monastic communities in whose liturgy one has been privileged to share – all, in their own way, teachers, inspiring and motivating one to learn more about the Psalter – a list of names begins to form, far too long for inclusion in these few lines. However, two dear friends must not go unmentioned: Wilfrid J. Harrington OP, who was the Priory Institute's expert reader of the first draft of this book, and who has done me the honour of writing its Foreword; Sean V. Freyne, Professor Emeritus of Theology at Trinity College Dublin, who mentored my doctoral studies on the early Christian reception of the psalms.

Margaret M. Daly-Denton

Foreword

We might expect that the Bible will have something to teach us about prayer. What may surprise us Christians is the naturalness of the prayer of Israel. The people of Israel spoke straightforwardly to their God. And they addressed him with refreshing boldness. Theirs is no God of terror but a God who is personal and very near. We have much to learn from that prayerful people.

Prayer in the Old Testament is by no means confined to the Psalter. But the Psalter is special and might be regarded as a school of prayer. These one hundred and fifty religious poems are varied: psalms of praise, of lament, of petition. They vary, too, in poetic quality and religious depth. They tell us how we stand before God in the changing circumstances of our lives. Even the most dreary psalm from a literary point of view can speak to the heart when we are ready to hear. Different psalms, even different lines of individual psalms, can be what we need at a given moment to heal a torn relationship with God or with family and friends. And we can be challenged in our notion of God to realise that God is not as limited as we sometimes imagine.

A basic characteristic of prayer in the Psalter is the reality of the divine presence: it is to God that one speaks. The presence of the Lord is an active presence. Communion with God through prayer moves God. Through the psalms there is the scope of entering into creation, the world that declares the glory of God. This goes deeper than our current concern with ecology. It shares in the response of creation itself to its maker.

Israel's God was a living God who offered life with dignity to his people. Praise was a natural response. The hymn acclaims God's redemptive deed as this continues amid the people. It does not seek to make any return to God but joyfully acknowledges God's graciousness. Hymns of praise achieved a fresh status in that encounter with God which is the liturgy. There God is acclaimed not only for his deeds in the past but for his

goodness here and now. The so-called thanksgiving psalms are, in fact, songs of declarative praise. Praise properly exalts and magnifies *another*; in thanksgiving the self plays a large role. Throughout the Psalter there is the imagery of the psalms, imagery that retains its validity and power. Prayer language should be sincere and congenial to the one who prays; it need not be flat and unimaginative. It can be shaped by the rich texture of biblical language.

Psalms of lament are notably present in the Psalter. Lamentation reflects the reality of human existence. It is the language of suffering. The language of suffering can be uninhibited in the face of suffering that can no longer be comprehended. The accusation is mounted: How could God have allowed this to happen? The accusation is made in the context of talking with God, the context of prayer. It is the very relationship with God that makes the complaint possible. This boldness can upset Christian sensitivity. And there is the added problem of violent language – surely not appropriate to prayer? The treatment of lamentation and violent language is, perhaps, the most enlightening section of this thoroughly helpful book.

The Psalter was at the centre of liturgical worship in the Jerusalem temple and lives on in the liturgies of Judaism and of Christianity. Early Christian reception of the psalms involved a re-reading of the psalms in the light of the Christ-event. Already, for Israel, a perception of David, as psalmist and patron of the cult, had greatly influenced the understanding of psalms and the growth of the Psalter. For Christians, David became a type of Jesus and the psalms were prayed christologically. The evangelists have drawn on the psalms in their portrayal of Jesus, notably in the passion narratives. The psalms have been part of Christian worship from the earliest days. And, beyond the liturgy, they have inspired and coloured the prayer of Christians.

All of this is clear to those who have an understanding of the history and growth of the Psalter and its place in the prayer-life of Christians. But what of the uninitiated, who treasure the psalms, but lack that understanding? Help is at hand in *Psalm-Shaped Prayerfulness: A Guide to the Christian Reception of the Psalms*.

Margaret M. Daly-Denton is a scripture scholar and inspiring teacher. Moreover, she has deep interest and personal in-

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volvement in liturgy, nurtured through her previous experience as Music Director at a Liturgical Institute and as a member of a monastic community. Musically gifted, a composer, she is especially sensitive to the poetry and religious power of the psalms. A measure of her committed interest in liturgical use of psalms is her elegant hand-written large-format Psalter for choral use in monasteries – manifestly a labour of love.

This considerable expertise, sensitivity and enthusiasm pervade her book and are expressed in a fluid, friendly style. She offers the companionship of a benign guide. While clearly suggesting that the reader broaden one's field of study, Margaret can justifiably claim that one may have a profitable learning experience by following her book, together with a Bible. Not only profitable indeed, but enjoyable.

It is an honour and privilege to contribute this Foreword. It is a gesture of admiration and acknowledgment of a treasured friendship.

Wilfrid J. Harrington OP

In celebration of the tenth birthday of the Priory Institute



Introduction

This book began its life as course material for a degree programme delivered by distance learning. It has been written in a friendly, informal style, originally to compensate for the isolation of the solitary student, and now, it is hoped, to offer you the companionship of a guide as you explore the Psalter yourself. Two icons appear frequently in the text:



The Bible Icon indicates suggestions for your own study of the Psalter in its scriptural setting, something absolutely essential, if this book is to do for you what is says on the cover.



The Library Icon indicates suggestions for taking the 'scenic route' on your learning journey by exploring some of the fascinating 'side roads' signposted in the text. If you prefer to keep to the main road, you will still be able to have a good learning experience using no other books but this one and a Bible.

The Structure of this Book

In the first four chapters of this guide, we will learn something of the story of the Psalter: how the Book of Psalms reached its present shape. We will come to see that the order in which the psalms are arranged in it can often turn out to be an important key to their interpretation. As part of this overview of the entire Psalter, we will look at the traditional attribution of the psalms to David, another key to their interpretation. After that, in chapters five to eight, we will zoom in on a representative selection of psalms in order to appreciate their poetic, cultural and theo-

logical features. Only after doing all of this will we view the Psalter as a gift received by Christianity from Judaism, a gift that Christians have made their own. Thus from chapters nine to twelve we will be looking over the shoulders of the early believers in Jesus as they read the psalms in the light of their Easter experience. In particular, we will explore New Testament psalm usage, viewing this against the background of the interpretation of the psalms in Jewish circles around the first century CE. In the last four chapters, we will see how we today might make our own that long tradition of engagement with the psalms that has shaped Christian prayerfulness over the centuries. This section begins with a look at violence and vindictiveness in the psalms, major stumbling blocks for people encountering the psalms in worship. It then deals with the role of the Psalter in Christian community worship, and its indispensability for an authentically Christian spirituality.

Your Study Version of the Psalter

It is important to study the psalms as found in the Bible, rather than limiting oneself to a separate Psalter. It is recommended that you use as your principal study text a scholarly translation, such as those found in the following versions of the Bible:

- The Revised Standard Version (RSV)
- The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
- The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)
- The Revised English Bible (REB)
- The New American Bible (NAB)

There can be great benefit from consulting several different versions of the Psalter, including those used in your own tradition's worship, for example, the *Grail Psalter* (as used in the Roman Catholic liturgy in Ireland), or the Coverdale and Frost Psalters (as used in the Church of Ireland). When used alongside a good study version, a less literal translation or paraphrase such as that in *The Good News Bible* (GNB; also known as the Good News Translation) or *The Christian Community Bible* may often provide illuminating 'commentary'. However, if you limit yourself to a paraphrase Bible, you are 'at the mercy' of the pre-suppositions and interpretations of those who produced it and thus at a further remove from the original psalm than you need

to be. Finally, of course, those who can read the Psalter in other modern languages will find their learning experience enriched.

Unless otherwise stated, the version used in the writing of this guide is the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) which provides a reliable rendering of the original Hebrew. Occasionally we use the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), but when we do, we follow the liturgical practice of changing its archaic pronouns (thee, thy, thine, etc) to 'you' and 'your.'

A Psalm Study Routine

Throughout this book you will be invited to explore various psalms yourself. Most of the psalms are quite short. That makes a good many of them a manageable length for a typical study session of about 60 to 90 minutes. So you can have the satisfaction of doing a quite a thorough exploration of a complete psalm in a relatively short period of time. The following is a suggested routine that you may find helpful.

- Read the psalm in your study version of the Bible. Even if it mystifies you, just experience it. Write down your first impression of it in a few lines.
- Read your psalm again in as many other translations as you possess. If you are a regular singer of the psalms in worship, read it in your liturgical version. Make a note of any significant differences that strike you.
- Chase up any cross references to other parts of the Bible that may be given in the footnotes to your psalm in your Study Bible. Until you have reached chapter nine of this guide, it is suggested that you keep to the Old Testament references.
- Read the notes in your Study Bible and whatever commentaries you may have on this psalm. You will inevitably find that commentators disagree, but it is good to look at a psalm from different perspectives.
- As you progress through chapters three and four of this guide, you will find that you are becoming alert to the location of your chosen psalm in the Five Books of the Psalter as a possible key to its interpretation. Awareness of this aspect of psalm study may prompt you to check out the psalms that come before and after the one you are studying, and to see if

perhaps it belongs to a particular cluster of psalms.

- Having taken time to reflect on all you have read, go back to the psalm again and let what you have learned influence your reading of it.
- Write down your impression of the psalm now and compare it with what you wrote on your first reading.

Welcome!

Your fascination with the psalms may have been aroused in worship or in study. Or maybe the psalms annoy you so much that you want to find out why Christians bother with them at all. Wherever you are coming from, welcome to the expedition! This guide is intended to whet your appetite for study of the psalms. The most interesting and exciting part of your learning experience will not be what you read in this book, or even in much better ones, but what you discover for yourself as you delve into your own copy of The Book of Psalms.

PART I



CHAPTER ONE

*A Book of Praises**A First Glance at the Psalms*

Some of the most beloved passages of scripture are found in The Book of Psalms, notably, 'The Lord is my Shepherd' (Ps 23). Many phrases that are part of everyday spoken English come from the Psalter: the expressions, to be 'at death's door' (Ps 107:18), for example, or to be 'at [one's] wits' end' (Ps 107:27), or to have reached the age of 'three score years and ten,' (Ps 90:10). The expression 'valley of tears,' familiar from the Christian chant, *Salve Regina* ('Hail Holy Queen'), comes from the ancient Greek and Latin translations of Ps 84:6. The lyrics of some well known songs come from the psalms: 'O for the Wings of a Dove' (Ps 55:6), Haydn's 'The Heavens are Telling' (Ps 19:1), Boney M's 'By the Waters of Babylon' (Ps 137), the chorus composed by Patrick Doyle, sung at the end of Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, *Non nobis Domine* (Ps 115:1). The folk memory of the Latin liturgy has preserved numerous phrases from the psalms: *De profundis* ('Out of the depths'), the opening of Ps 130; the *Asperges*, the ritual of sprinkling the congregation with holy water during which Ps 51:7 is traditionally sung; the *Lavabo*, alluding to Ps 26:6 formerly recited by the priest as he ritually washed his hands.

However, there is a less appealing side to the Psalter. Alongside the most sublime expressions of religious faith, it also gives voice to some horrific curses and prayers for vengeance. God is asked to strike all the psalmist's enemies on the face and smash their teeth, for example (Ps 3:7). Frequently we also meet in the psalms what appears, at face value, to be downright self-righteousness. The psalmists have no inhibitions about declaring that they have kept their hearts clean and washed their hands in innocence (Ps 73:13). The Psalter is also full of enigmatic lines like, 'Og the king of Bashan' (Ps 136:20) or, 'sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns' (Ps 58:9). Stephen Fry, re-

calling his bewilderment at some of the psalm passages that he found himself singing as an Anglican boy chorister, used the line 'Moab is my wash-pot' (Ps 60:8) as the title for his memoir!

Those first century CE Israelites who came to see Jesus as the fulfilment of their people's hopes brought their love of the psalms with them into a new community of Jews and Gentiles. As a result, Christians, as well as Jews, have treasured them ever since. The Psalter seems to have been the principal text that the earliest Christians turned to when they searched the scriptures to find a way of understanding their Easter experience of Jesus. It is the most quoted part of the Old Testament in the New, with the imagery most extensively used to convey the status of the risen Jesus – that he is enthroned as Lord at the right hand of God – coming directly from Ps 110:1. The spirituality of Christians down the centuries has been indelibly marked by the gospel accounts of Jesus praying the psalms, particularly as he was dying on the cross. His anguished, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk 15:34 and Mt 27:46, quoting Ps 22:1), and his loud cry, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,' (Lk 23:46, quoting Ps 31:5) open for Christians a doorway into the psalm-shaped prayerfulness of their Lord.

Perhaps the most endearing feature of the psalms is their honesty. The psalmists had no hesitation in expressing their feelings to God, about 'letting it all hang out'. Sometimes they express sheer delight in God (Ps 73:25-26); other times, sheer frustration (Ps 74:11). They do not hesitate to blame God for whatever is wrong, often accusing God of falling asleep on the job of being Israel's protector (Ps 35:23). They moan and groan. They openly wonder if there is any point in living a good life when the wicked seem to be doing so well (Ps 73:13). In all of this, they presume permission for an intimacy with God that allows them to be utterly frank.

Looking at the Psalter

The first thing to note about the biblical Book of Psalms is that it is not monolithic, just as the Bible itself is not all of a piece, but is actually a 'library' of different books (Greek: *biblia*, books). The Psalter is an anthology where compositions by different authors living at different times have been collected and preserved. It is

the product of a long history of belief in a God intensively involved in the lives of the people of Israel, both as a community and as individuals. The Psalter is popularly described as a prayer book, or even a hymn book in recognition of the fact that what are preserved in our Bibles are what we would call today the lyrics. The original music is lost, although something of it must surely have been handed down in traditional Jewish chants and even in Christian plainsong which is an outgrowth of the Jewish musical heritage. However, the Psalter is so much more than a prayer book or even a hymn book. While it does contain prayers and hymns of praise, these are only part of an amazing variety of compositions: poems written for great royal occasions, philosophical reflections of wise sages, odes celebrating the city of Jerusalem and its Temple, meditations on the Torah (Law), and saga-like recitals of history.

In the Bible, what we know as the Psalter is called 'Praises,' or in the Hebrew language spoken by the scholars and sages of rabbinic Judaism, *Sefer Tehillim*, 'A Book of Praises.' The word *tehillim* (praises) is related to 'alleluia,' a shout of praise that Christians, in continuity with their Jewish religious ancestors have always sung in Hebrew. The Hebrew verb, *hâlal* (to praise) combined with a short form of the divine Name, *Yah*, gives us 'alleluia' (in an older English spelling, 'hallelujah') which means 'Praise the Lord.' The word 'alleluia' occurs 206 times in the Psalter, most frequently from Ps 111 onwards where it becomes almost a title for psalms.

The earliest Christians who were mainly Greek speakers knew this collection as *Hê Biblos Psalmôn*, 'The Book (scroll) of Psalms' (Lk 20:42), or simply as 'The Psalms' (Lk 24:44). The word 'psalm' comes from the Greek word *psalmos* which originally referred to playing a stringed instrument with the fingers and later came to mean a song accompanied on a harp-like instrument called a *psalterion*. This instrument gave us the word Psalter which is used for the entire collection of 150 psalms.

From Lament to Praise

As we will see, not every psalm is actually a song of praise. In fact, by far the majority of the psalms are prayers of people in distress. However, the over-riding dynamic of the collection is a

movement towards praise, in fact, a progression from the distress of Ps 3 (Pss 1 and 2 being a prologue) to the praise of Ps 150. From Ps 90 onwards, psalms of praise predominate. The psalms where the composer cries out in grief, terror or pain – the lament psalms – all conclude on an upbeat note of praise for divine deliverance and rescue, with just one exception, Ps 88. But even the bleak ending of this desolate prayer – ‘utter darkness’ – is not really the last word, because Ps 88 is part of that great sweep of psalmody that culminates in the five-psalm outpouring of praise that concludes the Psalter. That, at least, is how commentators have tended to explain the anomaly that is Ps 88. Later on we will discover that a key to understanding its blackness is its location in the Psalter. This brings us to the importance of looking at psalms within their biblical context, rather than envisaging them as completely independent compositions strung together in a haphazard kind of a way.

Our Experience of the Psalms in Worship

Most of us encounter the psalms in our experience of Christian worship. Here we meet individual psalms lifted out, as it were, from their biblical context. In the *Roman Lectionary* and the ecumenical *Revised Common Lectionary* for Sunday eucharist, for example, a psalm is frequently chosen on the basis of a thematic link with a reading from the Old Testament, so that it can facilitate the community’s prayerful response to the word. In the Prayer of the Church (The Liturgy of the Hours) a psalm might be appointed for Evening Prayer because it compares the lifting up of the worshipper’s hands in prayer to the evening sacrifice in the temple (Ps 141:2). Or again, the line ‘I will lie down in peace and sleep comes at once’ (Ps 4:8) has made Ps 4 an obvious Night Prayer (Compline) psalm for many centuries. In all of these cases, we pray, sing or hear an ‘isolated’ psalm without being aware of its context in the Bible. There is, however, an older tradition which is more attentive to the biblical order of the psalms. This tradition continues in the Anglican cycle of daily prayer, for example, and in the liturgy of some monastic communities, where psalms are sung in the sequence in which they appear in the biblical Psalter.

Developments in Psalm Scholarship

Until quite late in the twentieth century, biblical scholars tended to see the Psalter as a collection of independently composed poems. They regarded the order in which the psalms appear in it as quite random and hardly deserving of much comment, except in the case of occasional clusters of psalms, apparently grouped together for some ritual purpose, such as Pss 120-134, the Psalms of Ascents which were believed to be sung on pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Viewing the psalms as independent compositions, preserved in the storage box of the Psalter, scholars thought that the most beneficial way to help people appreciate them was to classify them according to their genres. So they identified various psalms as hymns, others as laments of the individual or laments of the community, some as royal psalms, some as praise of God as king, some as Zion Psalms, Torah Psalms (celebrating God's Law) and others as didactic or teaching psalms, imparting wisdom. This categorising approach is known among biblical scholars as form criticism. The most famous and influential exponents of the form-critical approach were the German scholars, Herman Gunkel (1862-1932) and Sigmund Mowinckel (1884-1965). In recognition of their work, many scholars writing in English today still use the German word *Gattung* for the genre, form or type of psalm.

When we read any literature at all, it does help to know what genre the author has used. If, for example, we are reading a satirical novel, we expect a certain amount of exaggeration and plenty of humour. These are not expectations that we would bring to our reading of an academic history book. Similarly with the psalms, it can help to have a sense of what kind of writing each psalm is. The great contribution of the form-critical approach to psalm study was to highlight the diversity of literary genres in the Psalter: psalms of thanksgiving for specified blessings, psalms that are simply outpourings of uninhibited praise, psalms that recount history, wisdom or philosophising psalms, even psalms in the form of a court case – God v. Israel. However, form criticism actually set itself an impossible task, as so many psalms had elements from more than one form and so defied categorisation. Some psalms appeared to be composed for the official Temple cult; many others seemed to fulfil a far more per-

sonal function: to give voice to an individual Israelite's spirituality and creativity. A major weakness of the categorising approach was that psalms not fitting easily into a category tended to be under-estimated as oddities instead of being appreciated as unique works of artistry and insight.

From about the 1980s, psalm scholars became increasingly convinced that the order in which the psalms appear in the Psalter is significant. In recent years, as their conviction that this order is intentional and purposeful has strengthened, they have applied themselves to the task of trying to work out the rationale for it. At the root of this approach is the conviction that the location of a particular psalm within the over-all structure of the Psalter may well be an important key to its interpretation. This is the approach that we will be taking in this guide. So as we begin with a look at the whole Psalter as a book, we are engaging in 'state of the art' psalm study.

The Numbering of the Psalms

Before we continue our exploration of the Psalter, we have another important matter to clarify: the numbering of the psalms. Christians of the Roman Catholic tradition, living in some parts of the English-speaking world (including Ireland) have probably noticed that the numbering of the psalms is different in their Bible to that in their liturgical books (Missal, Lectionary, Liturgy of the Hours). Most times, although not always, the liturgical number is one lower than the biblical number. Musicians will remember that the well-known hymn, 'All People that on Earth Do Dwell' is sung to a melody called 'The Old Hundredth,' so named because this hymn is a metrical paraphrase of Ps 100. However, Roman Catholics who know this psalm in the Grail version as 'Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth,' would not be wrong in saying that it is Ps 99. How and why did this confusion come about?

When the psalms were translated from the original Hebrew into Greek (about 200 years before the birth of Christ) for the benefit of Greek-speaking Jews of both the homeland and the Diaspora, Pss 9 and 10 were treated as one psalm. This was an easy 'mistake' to make, as the ancient manuscripts did not use numerals to identify the psalms. People referred to the psalms

by their first line. In fact, we will see later on that the Greek translators were probably right! Anyway, this meant that the Greek numbering fell one behind the Hebrew from Ps 10 onwards. Most Bibles today give the Greek numbering of the psalms in brackets after the Hebrew numbering. A look at a Bible that does this will show that there is another discrepancy between the Hebrew and Greek numbering around Pss 114-116. Finally the Greek numbering catches up with the Hebrew where Ps 147 is made into two psalms. The numbering of Pss 148, 149 and 150 agrees in both the Hebrew and Greek versions. There is just one final complication, however: an extra psalm in the ancient Greek Psalter, Ps 151.

The ancient Greek translation, known as the *Septuagint*, was the Bible of the earliest Greek-speaking Christians. When Latin began to be more commonly spoken than Greek, Latin translations of the psalms were done from the Greek Psalter. As a result, the Greek numbering of the psalms held sway in the Christian Church until the Reformation. As part of a 'back to basics' movement which included limiting the canon of scripture to the books in Hebrew regarded by the Jews as sacred scripture, the reformers opted for the Hebrew numbering of the psalms.

When a vernacular liturgy was restored to Roman Catholic Christians after the Second Vatican Council, English-speakers went in two directions. Roman Catholics in the United States of America chose as their liturgical version the Psalter from *The New American Bible* (completed 1970), which used the Hebrew numbering. This was seen as an ecumenical gesture towards the churches of the Reformation. It also meant that Jews and Christians, who both treasure the psalms, would be using the same numbering. Roman Catholics in other English-speaking countries, including Ireland, chose the *Grail Psalter* for their liturgical books. This version uses the Greek numbering that was traditional in the Latin liturgy. In those countries there has been considerable confusion about the numbering of the psalms ever since and people have had to think in terms of a liturgical numbering and a numbering for study purposes. In this guide, we use the Hebrew numbering.



If you were a first century BCE scribe (copyist) writing a scroll of the psalms, you would not have numerals in your 'master-copy' and you might not have all the headings like 'To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David' that we have in our Bibles today. If you had to decide where one psalm ends and another begins, purely on the basis of content,

- Would you combine Pss 9 and 10 to make one psalm, as the Greek translators did?
- Some people think that Ps 27 is really two psalms. Would you agree? If you do, where would you think the first psalm ends and the second one begins? If you do not, why not?
- Would you agree that Pss 42 and 43 are two separate psalms?
- Would you consider Ps 19 as one psalm or two?
- Would you make Pss 113-115 into one psalm, as the Greek translators did?
- You will see that the Greek translators divided Hebrew Ps 147 into two psalms, Ps 146 and 147. Taking into consideration that a group of psalms running from Hebrew Pss 146 to 150 brings the Psalter to a resounding conclusion, do you agree with them?

Think about the literary and thematic features that influenced your answers. There are no right or wrong answers; this is simply to encourage you to begin exploring the Psalter yourself.

Verse Numbering in the Psalter

Originally there was no chapter and verse numbering in the Bible. That is why in Mk 12:26 Jesus says, 'Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush?' We today would say, 'Have you not read Exodus 3:6?' In the case of the Psalter, individual psalms were identified by their first lines, just as we still call our most well known psalm, 'The Lord is my Shepherd.' The Coverdale Psalter, as used in the Anglican Communion, has the first line of every psalm as a title, in Latin. The traditional term for such a title is an *incipit* (Latin, 'it begins'). So, for example, the *incipit* of Ps 19 is *Caeli enarrant* ('The heavens declare').

Referring to psalms by their number developed as part of a larger project of dividing the whole Bible into numbered chapters. The chapter divisions in our present day Bibles are based on the work of Stephen Langton (1150-1228), an Archbishop of Canterbury. By the middle of the 14th century, this Christian invention had been taken up by the Jews for their sacred scriptures. It was a 15th century Jewish Rabbi, Isaac Nathan, however,

who developed the idea further by devising verse numbering. The division of the New Testament into chapters and verses followed over the next few decades, with the Geneva Bible (1560) being the first Bible in English to use both chapter and verse numbering.

When we study the psalms, it is important to remember that the verse numbering is a much later addition. This is because there are many places in the Psalter (as in the whole Bible) where the verse divisions cut across the literary structures of the poetry. For example, have a look at Ps 5:4-6 as it appears in the NRSV.

- v. 4. For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you.
- v. 5. The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.
- v. 6. You destroy those who speak lies;
the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

The verse numbering encourages us to read this as three groups of two lines each, that is, as three couplets. This impression is reinforced by the modern punctuation, the full stops at the end of each couplet which are not in the original Hebrew. When you look more closely at what the text is saying, you might think that it falls more naturally into two groups of three lines each:

- For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you;
the boastful will not stand before your eyes.
- You hate all evildoers;
you destroy those who speak lies;
the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

Clearly the poet is saying basically the same thing in three different ways, with each repetition reinforcing the point. So perhaps it might have been better if the division into verses gave us two sets of 'triplets' instead of three sets of 'twins'.

Other Editorial Features

The same principle applies to the division of psalms into stanzas. This varies from one version of the Bible to another and is the work of modern editors. As we saw with regard to translation in

the Introduction to this guide, these ways of laying out the text on the printed page reflect the presuppositions and interpretations of scholars. Often the stanza divisions differ from one version of the Bible to another. Sometimes this is because the original Hebrew text is unclear and consequently open to more than one interpretation. Obviously these editorial features of modern Bibles can be helpful, but we should not forget that our ancient manuscripts of the psalms do not present them in stanzas.

Headings and Titles

Finally, the matter of the titles on the psalms can be confusing. In the Bible, the psalms have titles like 'A Psalm of David,' performance instructions such as 'To the leader: with stringed instruments,' and other enigmatic headings like 'Do not destroy' (probably the name of a melody). All of these are part of the biblical text. However, depending on what Bible you are using, you may also find other headings such as 'Morning Prayer' for Ps 5 in the NJB or 'Prayer for Divine Help' for the same psalm in the NAB, or 'Trust in God for Deliverance from Enemies' in the NRSV. These are not part of the biblical text, but are from the hands of the editors who produced these versions of the Bible. By all means, take note of them and learn from them, but without letting yourself be pinned down by them. As you can see from this one example, editors disagree.



Before proceeding to chapter two, take time to explore the Psalter.

- Have a look at some more passages in the psalms where the verse numbering seems to be out of kilter with the psalm's poetic structure. Ps 15:2-4 may be another case of three sets of 'twins' that should be two sets of 'triplets'. Verse 3 of Ps 55 begins in rather a strange place! For an egregious example of 'insensitive' verse division, see Ps 42:6. See also Pss 48:2, 52:2 and 56:3. We are not concerned here with when or why this happened; it is just a matter of being alert to the secondary nature of verse divisions, devised in the 16th century, and of knowing that it is sometimes better to ignore them.
- If you have more than one version of the Bible, you may find a discrepancy in the stanza division around Ps 22:22. The Hebrew here is difficult to translate. Where the translators opt for the rendering, 'Save ... my afflicted soul from the horns of the wild

oxen,' this becomes the final line of a stanza. Where they opt for 'From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me,' this then becomes the first line of the next stanza.

- Psalm 73 appears under the following headings in various editions of the Psalter:

NAB (1970)	The False Happiness of the Wicked
NJB (1985)	The Triumph of Justice
Grail (1963 & 1986)	The Problem of Innocent Suffering
OAB (1991)	Meditation on the Justice of God
Revised NAB (1991)	The Trial of the Just
HCSB (1993, 2006)	Plea for Relief from Oppressors
ICEL Psalter (1994)	Life is not fair. Good people suffer: wicked people prosper. Only God's presence brings true joy.

Look at Ps 73 yourself and see how successful you think these modern commentators have been in encapsulating the psalm in a brief heading. As well as alerting you to the secondary status of these headings, this will also help you to understand the exploratory nature of editorial work on the Psalter.

A Preliminary Overview of the Psalter

Our first glance at the Psalter has shown us a diverse collection of Israelite religious poetry ranging from the heights of ecstatic praise to the depths of bitter lament. This collection bears all the signs of having been purposefully put together in a logical order. Originally composed in Hebrew, the psalms come down to us translated. In particular, the Greek and Latin translations have profoundly affected the way the psalms have been understood in Christianity. In the course of the transmission, or 'handing on,' of the Psalter, the psalms have acquired various editorial features: titles, verse numbering, arrangement in stanzas, interpretive headings. This process began in biblical times – with the order in which the psalms were arranged and the addition of titles like 'A Psalm of David' – and has continued as scholars have grappled with the text, and as believers both Jewish and Christian, have allowed the psalms to shape their prayer, right up to the present day.



Since most twentieth century commentaries provide form critical analysis of psalms, your additional reading will most certainly engage you in form criticism. The form-critical method is still valid and valuable. Some of the scholars that have used it are giants of psalm scholarship who can still help us immensely in our study of the psalms. Form-critical approaches, however, need to be supplemented and enhanced by methods that take a more holistic approach to the Psalter.

You are likely to find that books on the psalms, biblical encyclopaedia articles, and introductions to the Old Testament published before the 1980s do not take a holistic approach to the Psalter. For example, Leopold Sabourin's book, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning* was hailed on its publication in 1974 as 'the most complete, up-to-date and reliable study of the Psalms in English.' Sabourin ignored the biblical order completely, arranging the psalms according to genre (*Gattung*), as hymns, laments, psalms of confidence, royal psalms and didactic psalms. Although dated now, from that point of view, his book is still a valuable resource, well worth consulting, as it makes available to English-speaking readers the insights of many great international commentators.

In contrast, Robert Davidson's *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1998) provides a short commentary on each of the 150 psalms, while taking a holistic approach to the Psalter. A concise and accessible introduction to 'state of the art' psalm scholarship is found in Alastair G. Hunter's *An Introduction to the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2008). This has a helpful discussion of form critical approaches to the psalms on pages 43-54.

CHAPTER TWO

The Psalms of David

David is mentioned by name in only four psalms (Pss 78, 89, 132 and 144). A quick glance through the 'Book of Praises,' though, will show that quite a few are entitled, 'A Psalm of David.' In this chapter we investigate the connection between David and the psalms.



To understand this chapter, it is important to know King David's story, as told in the Deuteronomistic History. If you are a bit vague about this, take the time to read from 1 Samuel 16 through to the end of the Second Book of Samuel. All that is required at this stage is a general knowledge of the story. Obviously it can be helpful to consult the notes in a study Bible, but it would probably be more beneficial, at this stage, simply to enjoy the art of biblical narrative.

The Biblical Psalm Titles (Superscriptions)

The original Hebrew usually translated, 'A Psalm of David' is a little ambiguous and is sometimes rendered as 'A Psalm for David' or 'A David Psalm.' It could mean something like 'A psalm in the manner of David.' At this stage, we are not asking whether or not David really wrote psalms, or even who wrote them, or even when they were written. We are taking here what is called a final form approach to the Psalter, looking at it as it has come down to us. Our search for clues to the nature and history of the Psalter begins with these titles. If you leaf through the Psalter you will notice them on most of the psalms. Remember, though, that some modern editions of the Bible add other non-biblical headings, as aids to the readers' understanding. Ignore these in the meantime.

The biblical psalm titles may be new to anyone whose encounters with the psalms have been mainly in the setting of Christian worship. The technical term for them is 'superscription' (or 'superscript') which means simply 'what is written above'. Generally speaking, the superscriptions to the psalms have three main elements: