

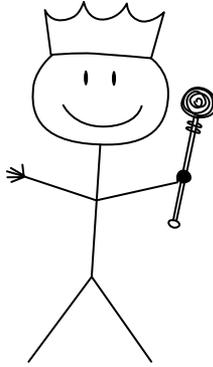
One

What's a "Psalm"? Who Wrote Them? and All That Stuff

A *psalm* is a poem sung to music from a stringed instrument you pluck, such as a harp or guitar. The word *psalm* comes from a Greek word meaning "to pluck."

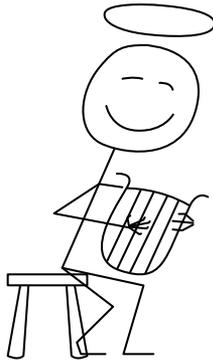
But the psalms weren't written in Greek; they were written in Hebrew. In Hebrew, the word for psalm is *mizmor* [mizz-MORE]. Later folks translated them into Greek and pretty much every other known language.

The one who wrote them in Hebrew was, as we said, David. Here is David:



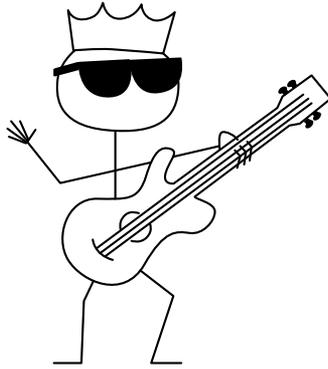
He is going to be our constant companion through this book.

David was famous for playing the lyre, an ancient kind of harp. To us, a lyre is a pretty tame instrument, so David appears to us like this:



Pretty tame.

But in ancient times the lyre was cool and popular, as is the electric guitar now. So to ancient people, David looked more like this:



He was the ancient “King of Rock and Roll.”

After all, he *was* king of Israel, and he was also their star musician (see 2 Samuel 23:1).



David grew up as a shepherd boy in ancient Israel around the year 1000 BC. He rose up in the ranks of the army of Saul, king of Israel, and after Saul died, David became king of Israel himself. Most would say David was Israel's greatest king, and his sons and grandsons ruled in Jerusalem for four hundred years. He was an ancestor of Jesus, whom Christians still accept as king of their lives. So we could say that David's descendant is still ruling today!

Tradition tells us that around seventy to eighty psalms were written by David.¹ That's about half the total collection of 150. Who wrote the others? An ancient Israelite choir known as the Sons of Korah gave us about a dozen psalms. Two of these choir members, Heman and Ethan, are mentioned by name, and each wrote a psalm (Psalms 88 and 89, respectively). Another dozen psalms were composed by Asaph, a choir leader David appointed. Two psalms are "of Solomon" (Psalms 72 and 127), although the first is almost certainly about him rather than by him. And finally, Moses wrote one psalm (Psalm 90).

All these authors lived in the 900s BC, except for Moses, who was older, living around 1500 BC or 1200 BC, depending on which historian you believe.

Many psalms are anonymous, and many of these were written long after David. Especially in the later parts of the Psalter, we find psalms that were clearly written up to five or six hundred years after David, during the time when his people, the Judeans (later called *Jews*), were taken into exile in Babylon and then returned and rebuilt their nation.

So the psalms were written over centuries, largely between 1000 BC and 400 BC.

How Were They Written?

As we said, Psalms was written in Hebrew. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, all of which are consonants since they did not write down vowels in ancient times. Some psalms begin each verse with the next letter of the alphabet.² (An alphabetic poem like that is called an acrostic.)

Hebrew has a few sounds that English doesn't. The most important is the hard "H," like the German "Bach." It's a sound like clearing the back of your throat. It is the first sound in a very important word in the psalms, *hesed*, which we will discuss later.

Hebrew poetry doesn't rhyme, but it does have rhythm.³ The basic part of a Hebrew poem is a two-line verse:

The wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. (Ps 1:5)

Usually the two lines say basically the same thing in two different ways, as above. But sometimes the two lines will say the opposite, like this:

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)

At other times, the second line will finish the idea of the first line:

"I have set my king
on Zion, my holy mountain." (Ps 2:6)

Or it will add another thought:

Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of God,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. (Ps 29:1)

Scholars call the two-line verse a *bicola*. When the two lines say almost the same thing, it's called *synonymous parallelism*. When they say the opposite, it's called *antithetical* [ANN-tee-THEH-TICK-ull] *parallelism*. Any other relationship between the two lines, as in the last two examples above, is called *synthetic parallelism*.

Now, go impress your friends. Tell them you were reading a psalm and found a *bicola* with antithetical parallelism. They will think you are very smart.

It's unlikely that King David wrote down his own psalms. Like other ancient royalty, he probably composed his poems orally and then recited them to a scribe. Ancient scribes in Israel wrote with black ink on parchment (animal skin) or papyrus, an ancient kind of paper made from marsh reeds. In fact, our word *paper* comes from *papyrus*.

Why Were They Written?

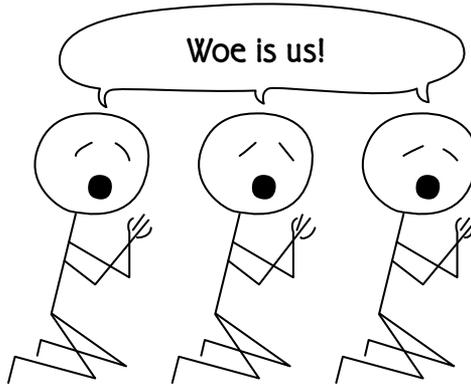
The psalms are religious poetry, and they were written for prayer, worship, and instruction. They fall into different categories.

Many of the psalms are called *laments*, which are prayers of a person who is suffering and crying to God for help. Laments can be of two kinds. Sometimes it is just one person, usually David, who is crying out to God in an individual lament.



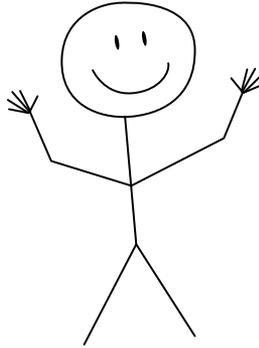
Individual Lament

At other times, it is a whole group of people, usually the nation of Israel.



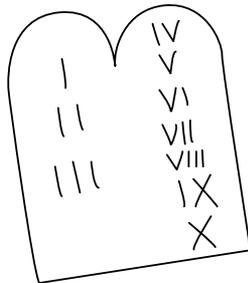
Communal Lament

Others are *thanksgiving* (in Hebrew, *todah*) psalms for giving thanks to God for a special deed God performed for the worshiper.

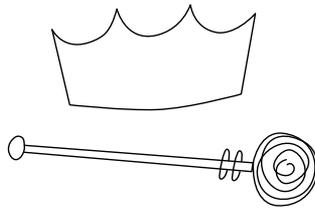


Thanksgiving

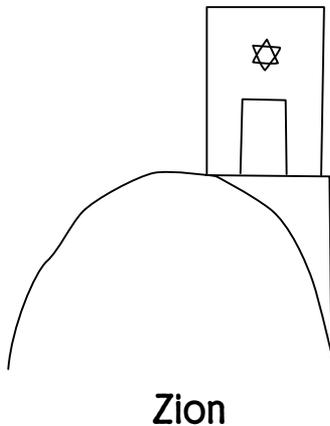
Still other psalms are *hymns* that praise God not for any one thing in particular but just for his general goodness and greatness (for example, Psalm 150). *Wisdom* psalms, on the other hand, give glory to God's law and instruction as a sound guide for living life (for example, Psalms 1, 19, and 119).



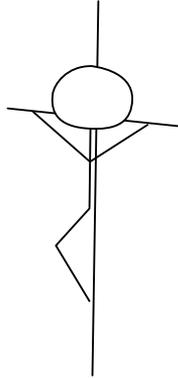
Royal psalms glorify the king or praise God for putting the king in place. There are not many of them, but they are very important and found in strategic places (at beginnings, endings, or transition points within books) in the Psalter (for example, Psalms 2, 45, 72, 89, 110, and 132).



Related to royal psalms are *Zion* psalms, psalms that glorify Zion, which is another name for Jerusalem, the royal capital and site of the Temple (for example, Psalms 46–48, 84, and 132).



Messianic psalms contain prophecies of Jesus. All the royal psalms are messianic, but there are other messianic psalms as well (such as Psalm 22).



Finally, there are even a few psalms that call down curses on enemies! (Psalm 137 is an example.) The special term for these is *imprecatory* [im-PREK-ah-tory] psalms.



Almost all the psalms fit into one of these categories.