

Contents

Foreword	xi
Introduction to the Psalms	1
Psalm 1: Reward and Punishment in the Book of Psalms	15
Psalms 3, 6, 30, 51: Transitions and Expansions Within Psalms	27
Psalms 9–10: Two Psalms or One?	37
Psalms 14–53: Redundant Psalms?	45
Psalm 19: Nature and Torah	51
Psalms 18, 57, 59, 63, 142: David and Saul in the Psalms	59
Psalm 51: David’s Repentance from His Sin with Bathsheba and Uriah	73
God Insists on Truth: Rabbinic Evaluations of Two Audacious Biblical Prayers	83
Psalms 90–107: Rebuilding Faith After Crisis	93
Psalm 104: Interpretation of the Creation Narratives in Genesis	103
Psalms 113–118: <i>Hallel</i>	117
Psalms 121, 126: Journeys and Redemption	127
Psalm 145: Pure Praise	133

Introduction to the Psalms

Although we refer to the *book* of Psalms as though it is one book, it is in fact divided into five collections: Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–150. Perhaps the editors purposefully organized it into five collections to create a parallel with the Torah:

All that Moses did, David also did . . . Moses gave five books of the Torah to Israel, and David gave the five books of Psalms to Israel (*Midrash Psalms* 1:2).¹

Aside from noting the structural similarity, this Midrash parallels the two most important figures in Tanakh. Moses is the master of prophecy, and David is the master of prayer. Tanakh contains prophecy, which is the word of God to people; and wisdom, which is the word of people to other people. Psalms is the only book in Tanakh primarily representing the voice of people to God.

From the very beginnings of human history, people reach out to God through sacrifice (Cain and Abel) and prayer (from the time of Enosh, Genesis 4:25–26). While there are many rules and regulations for sacrifices and the Temple ritual in the Torah, there are none about prayer. The Torah does not explicitly command prayer at all,² but

Parts of this essay are adapted from Hayyim Angel, “Authorship and Structure of Psalms,” in Angel, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim* (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 210–219.

rather presents it as a spontaneous religious act during times of distress, petition, and gratitude.

With the elimination of sacrifices after the destruction of the Second Temple, prayer has taken on that ritualized role, as well. One talmudic passage captures the dual role of prayer, emulating the Patriarchs, but also corresponding to the sacrificial order:

It has been stated: R. Jose son of R. Hanina said: The prayers were instituted by the Patriarchs. R. Joshua b. Levi says: The prayers were instituted to replace the daily sacrifices (*Berakhot* 26b).

We cannot know if the psalms were composed initially from a spontaneous reaction to particular events, or whether they were inspired prayers composed to be recited as ritual liturgy. Regardless, they may be interpreted in multiple ways to address people in different circumstances, as we shall see in our analysis of individual psalms.

AUTHORSHIP OF THE PSALMS

Of the 150 psalms in the Masoretic Text, seventy-three contain David's name in their superscriptions (introductory verses). Asaph appears in twelve, the Sons of Korah in eleven, Solomon in two (72, 127), Moses in one (90), and Ethan the Ezrahite in one (89). Three psalms mention Jeduthun in their superscriptions (39, 62, 77). Of those, Psalms 39 and 62 also mention David, and Psalm 77 also mentions Asaph. Heman the Ezrahite is mentioned in 88 along with the sons of Korah. Forty-nine psalms have no name in their superscriptions and of those forty-nine, twenty-four have no introductory formula at all.

Several commentators explore the identities of the figures mentioned in the superscriptions. Asaph was a leading Levite musician in David's time (see 1 Chronicles 16:7–33). Following midrashic traditions,³ Rashi (on Psalm 42:1) asserts that the "Sons of Korah" refer to Korah's actual three sons (see Exodus 6:24). In contrast, Ibn Ezra (on Psalm 42:1) and many others maintain that the "Sons of Korah" are descendants of Korah.

The two Solomon psalms could have been composed by the wise king. However, some commentators maintain that the concluding verse of Psalm 72, “End of the prayers of David son of Jesse” (72:20), indicates that David composed this psalm on behalf of Solomon (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Meiri on 72:1). Alternatively, Solomon could have composed the psalm (Targum, *Song of Songs Rabbah* 4:4), and 72:20 is a concluding verse for Book 2 added by the editors of the book of Psalms.

At the time of David, there were Levite singers named Heman, Ethan (1 Chronicles 6:16–32), and Jeduthun (1 Chronicles 16:41–42; 25:1–6). It is possible that the names that appear in those psalms refer to those individuals (Ibn Ezra). Alternatively, Rashi suggests that the “Ezrahite” appellation for Heman and Ethan in Psalms 88–89 means “from Zerah of the Tribe of Judah,” based on the identification in 1 Chronicles 2:6, and these were different people from the Levites mentioned in 1 Chronicles 6. Although there was a Levite singer named Jeduthun, the expression *le-Yedutun* (of Jeduthun) appears in 39:1, whereas *al Yedutun* (on Jeduthun) is used in 62:1 and 77:1. That latter expression suggests an instrument or rhythm rather than a person. Given that all three Jeduthun psalms have the name of another individual (David or Asaph), it is difficult to clarify this reference.

Only two superscriptions explicitly date their psalms to a time other than that of David. Psalm 90 is ascribed to Moses, and Psalm 137 was composed “by the rivers of Babylon,” referring to the Babylonian exile after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, some 400 years after David.

SUMMARY CHART OF THE PSALMS

Here is a chart that shows the distribution of names and other information in the superscriptions:

Books 1-3	Book 4	Book 5
David (3-41, 51-70, 86) 39 and 62 have Jeduthun also	Moses (90)	David (108-110, 138-145)
Asaph (50, 73-83) 77 has Jeduthun also	David (101, 103)	Two Hallelujah collections (111-113; 146-150) Three psalms without superscriptions (114-116)
Sons of Korah (42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88) 88 has Heman the Ezrahite also		Hallelujah (117, 135) followed by "Praise the Lord for He is good" (118, 136)
Solomon (72) Ethan the Ezrahite (89)	For the Sabbath day (92) Of Thanksgiving (100) Of the lowly man (102)	"HaGomel" (107) Praise of the Torah (119) Song of Ascents (120-134, including four David, one Solomon) By the Rivers of Babylon (137)
Untitled (1, 2, 10, 33, 43, 66, 67, 71)	Untitled (91, 93-99, 104-106)	

THE RABBINIC SAGES

The Sages offer several approaches to the authorship and editing of the book of Psalms.

David wrote the book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Jeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah. . . . Why is not Ethan the Ezrahite also reckoned with? Ethan the Ezrahite is Abraham. . . . (*Bava Batra* 14b–15a).

In this passage, “wrote” can mean “authored,” or “edited,” or “committed oral traditions to writing.” All of the people on this list either preceded or were contemporaneous with David. This passage midrashically identifies the Ethan the Ezrahite of Psalm 89 with Abraham. It also identifies the “Sons of Korah” with Korah’s actual three sons. This rabbinic teaching considers David as the author of many of the psalms as well as the final editor of the book.

A different rabbinic tradition allows for post-David dating of psalms:

Ten men composed the book of Psalms: Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon – these are five. . . . Who are the other five? . . . Rav said: Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun, and the three sons of Korah and Ezra. Rabbi Johanan said: Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun are only one; add to them the three sons of Korah and Ezra (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 4:4).

Rav and Rabbi Johanan include Ezra in their list of authors, meaning that psalms were composed throughout the biblical period, even after David. The final formation of the book would have been done either by Ezra or the Men of the Great Assembly. This Midrash also claims that nobody disputes Solomon’s inclusion on the list, but he is not included on the list in *Bava Batra*. Melchizedek is also not on this list, though he appears in *Bava Batra*. Finally, David is counted among the ten, instead of being listed in addition to ten others in *Bava Batra*.

In one of his introductions to Psalms, Ibn Ezra quotes the Sages as attributing the composition to the Men of the Great Assembly:

Who composed this book? There is no need to answer, seeing that our Sages have said that the Men of the Great Assembly composed it. That is sufficient for us.

No extant rabbinic source states what Ibn Ezra claims,⁴ though his position dovetails with *Song of Songs Rabbah* in emphasizing the later endpoint of authorship. Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (Gra on Proverbs 24:23) suggests that while the Men of the Great Assembly did not originally author the psalms, they were the final editors, organized the collections, and added the superscriptions.

A third view found among the Sages is that of Rabbi Meir:

Rabbi Meir used to say: All the praises which are stated in the Book of Psalms, David uttered all of them, for it is said, “End of [*kollu*] the prayers of David son of Jesse” (Psalm 72:20): read not *kollu* [end of] but *kol ellu* [all these] (*Pesahim* 117a).

Differing from the first two sources that posit a multiplicity of authors, Rabbi Meir ascribes all psalms to David. He bases his assumption on a midrashic reading of Psalm 72:20 that is the opposite of the plain meaning of the verse. Nevertheless, the notion that David composed all the psalms became widespread over time.

POST-TALMUDIC COMMENTARY

Although Rabbi Meir did not elaborate on his attribution of all psalms to David, especially despite superscriptions that suggest otherwise, Rabbi Saadiah Gaon (882–942) did offer a theory of Davidic authorship in his commentary on Psalms. He asserted that all psalms are prophecies rather than prayers, and that David composed all of them. The other names that appear in the superscriptions refer to singers, musicians, or descendants of the named people. For example, Rabbi Saadiah maintains that David composed Psalm 90. “To Moses” refers to the Levitic descendants of Moses at the time of David, to whom David assigned this psalm to perform in the Temple.

It is possible that Rabbi Saadiah adopted this radical interpretation in the context of anti-Karaite polemics. Uriel Simon observes that the Karaites opposed rabbinic prayers and condemned the Sages for composing prayers that became the heart of Jewish liturgy. By placing the Amidah at the center of Jewish prayer, the Sages marginalized the divinely inspired psalms and replaced them with prayers of human origin. To counter this accusation, Rabbi Saadiah responded that it was necessary for the Sages to compose these prayers because the psalms are prophecies and therefore unsuitable to fill the role of prayer.⁵ Regardless, the preponderance of commentators rejected Rabbi Saadiah's approach. They all understand psalms to be prayers.

Rabbi Moshe ibn Gikatilla (eleventh century) adopted an approach starkly different from that of Rabbi Saadiah. He maintained that none of the psalms prophetically predict or anticipate events. Therefore, one must examine their content to determine which events inspired them.

Ibn Gikatilla argues that the expression *le-David* (of David) in superscriptions can either mean that David authored the psalm, or that someone else wrote the psalm in David's honor ("ode to David"). Those psalms that do not contain David's name could have been written after David's time. He presumes that anonymous psalms were not written by David. The psalms ascribed to Asaph and the Sons of Korah may also refer to their descendants and not always the Levites who were David's contemporaries. For example, Psalm 79, ascribed to Asaf, appears to reflect the period of the destruction of the Temple. Therefore, it may have been composed by descendants of Asaf. These figures may have authored these psalms, as opposed to Rabbi Saadiah's opinion that David composed all of them.⁶

Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) adopted a more cautious position than Ibn Gikatilla. Some psalms might prophetically anticipate events but it is not necessary that any of them do. Ibn Ezra also suggests that while anonymous psalms need not have been composed by David, they might have been. Conversely, some of the psalms with David's name in the superscription may not have been written by David, but rather, in his honor (e.g., Psalm 20).

Ibn Ezra's concept of prophetic anticipation is not the same as Rabbi Saadiah's view. According to Ibn Ezra, psalms are not prophecies written in the form of a prayer. Rather, they are prayers composed in anticipation of later events for later generations to use.

We may use the superscription of Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon," as a litmus test to illustrate how each of these commentators would respond to a psalm that evidently derives from a period centuries after David's time. Rabbi Saadiah argues that this psalm was composed by David through prophecy. It is as though David wrote: Thus says the Lord, there will be a destruction of the Temple and exile one day, and you will be miserable and desire revenge against your enemies. The psalm sounds like a lamentation, but is really a prophecy in the form of a lament.

Ibn Gikatilla submits that this psalm was composed by Jews in the Babylonian exile, lamenting their plight. Ibn Ezra suggests that this view of Ibn Gikatilla is plausible, but it is also possible that David prophetically foresaw the Babylonian exile and therefore composed this psalm to be used by those exiles as a prayer when the exile came. Ibn Ezra's first view is the same as Ibn Gikatilla's; his second view is not shared by Rabbi Saadiah. Rather, Ibn Ezra suggests that the psalm is a prayer written through prophetic anticipation.

Despite the diversity of traditional views on the authorship of Psalms, over time many came to believe that the "traditional" view of authorship was that David wrote all the psalms. In the nineteenth century, when German academic Bible Criticism challenged many traditional assumptions about the authorship of biblical books, many scholars rejected Davidic authorship of the book of Psalms by pointing to the superscription of Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon," since the Babylonian exile happened after David. Many believers insisted that David must have prophesied that psalm, but many others sensed a conflict and erroneously concluded that there was a discrepancy between faith in the traditional view and the text evidence.

In his introduction to the book of Psalms, Malbim (1809–1879) censures people of faith and the critics alike. Jewish tradition does

not demand belief in Davidic authorship or editing of the entire book of Psalms. Malbim adds that the assertion that David prophetically received Psalm 137 and included it in the book of Psalms also creates a problem of free will, since the existence of the psalm in Tanakh would make the destruction of the Temple set in stone some 400 years prior to the actual event. What would have happened had the people repented and avoided the destruction? Would the people then delete this psalm from Tanakh? In addition to Malbim's concern, there is an issue of relevance. How would people in David's time understand or use a psalm describing a future catastrophe?

After his discussion that essentially espouses the view of *Song of Songs Rabbah* and Ibn Ezra in understanding the book of Psalms as composed throughout the biblical period, Malbim relates his personal belief that David could have received these psalms with prophetic foresight and then kept them secret until the events occurred.⁷ Amos Hakham takes the first point of Malbim's analysis for granted. People composed and edited psalms through the period of the Men of the Great Assembly and those are divinely inspired prayers.⁸ These views accurately reflect biblical and talmudic-midrashic traditions.

In the twenty-first century, the myth of Davidic authorship as the "traditional" view continues to be perpetuated on both sides. Many traditionalists continue to teach that David was the author of Psalms. Academic scholars continue to assert wrongly that the traditional view was that David composed all of the psalms. Louis Jacobs used Psalm 137 as a precedent to challenge traditional views of authorship of other biblical books.⁹ Christine Hayes remarked: "Tradition attributes the entire book of Psalms to King David. . . . However . . . some [Psalms] are clearly postexilic, such as . . . Psalm 137. . . . Despite the claim of religious tradition, the psalms were not all penned by David."¹⁰ Similarly, James Kugel states that "Tradition assigns authorship to King David." He likewise appeals to the contents of Psalm 137 to explain how nineteenth-century scholars began to doubt this traditional assumption and ultimately rejected it.¹¹ This misconception creates a putative faith-text evidence conflict, when in fact none exists.

SUMMARY PRINCIPLES

According to traditional commentators, a superscription that says *le-David* (of David), or *le-Asaph* (of Asaph), etc., potentially has a range of meanings: (1) The psalm was written by this person or people. (2) The psalm was written in his or their honor by contemporaries or by later individuals. (3) The psalm was written by someone for the named people to sing or conduct. (4) The psalm was written by their descendants, or for their descendants to sing or to conduct.¹² (5) The psalm was written by that person, but could have been updated by a later writer.¹³

Having considered the biblical evidence, midrashic opinions, and later rabbinic commentary, we may derive several overarching principles of traditional interpretation: (1) The psalms were written and included in Tanakh with divine inspiration. (2) The book of Psalms expanded in content and form until the end of the period of Tanakh, until Ezra and the Men of the Great Assembly. (3) Whether a name appears on a psalm or not, we do not generally know who originally wrote the psalm, or if it was updated by later writers. (4) We generally do not know what event, if any, might have inspired the composition of a given psalm; psalms may have been composed initially as prayers for many occasions. (5) In theory, any psalm might prophetically anticipate an event, but none of them need to, and there never is reason to assume that any in fact do. (6) What matters most is what the psalm means and how it can be used as a prayer. These principles are helpful in understanding individual psalms and the book as a whole.

SING HIM A NEW SONG

Let us return to our earlier discussion about the Karaite protest against the Sages' composing new prayers and supplanting the inspired prayers in Psalms. Rabbi Saadiah's polemical stance against the Karaites regarding the nature of the book of Psalms – that it is comprised of prophecies not prayers – was admirable. However, Rabbi Saadiah's answer is unsatisfying, since our tradition uses the psalms as prayers, and this understanding appears patently correct in the text.

Offering a different response to the Karaite challenge, Amos Hakham responds that the book of Psalms contains beautiful poetry, but it often is difficult to understand. Additionally, many themes might be contained in a single psalm. Therefore, the Sages composed their prayers in simple Hebrew that could be understood by everyone, modeling their prayers after the Psalms and other verses in Tanakh.¹⁴

On a more conceptual level, the book of Psalms calls for people to compose new songs for God:

Sing Him a new song; play sweetly with shouts of joy (Psalm 33:3; cf. 40:4; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1).

Through their composition of liturgy, the Sages epitomize the relationship between the Written Law and the Oral Law. They capture the spirit of prayer from these psalms by composing their own, new prayers. By placing rabbinic prayers at the center of our liturgy, they demonstrate the need for human input and personalization of prayers. In contrast, the Karaites had no difficulty with the creation of the book of Psalms itself. Once that book was closed, however, they insisted that there was no room for new prayers.

Both sides of the debate are consistent with their general world-views. The Karaites froze the biblical text, whereas the Sages captured its inner essence and used Psalms to teach us how to pray. Amos Hakham observes that the book of Psalms encourages people to continue this vibrant process of prayer:

“Sing Him a new song” (Psalm 33:3): . . . it is likely that the verse means that it is worthy to sing a truly new song to God. The large number of Psalms attests to the fact that our predecessors composed new songs from time to time.¹⁵

“Sing to the Lord a new song . . .” (Psalm 149:1) intimates that even though we are approaching the conclusion of the book, we have not concluded all praises of God, and we are yet obligated to sing new songs to God. Indeed, each generation produced God-fearing individuals who composed new prayers, poems, and praises to God.¹⁶

Thus, the Karaites reflect their Written Law emphasis, whereas the Sages and later rabbinic tradition model the dynamic relationship between the Written and Oral Law, and how that impacts on prayer.

NOTES

1. Amos Hakham (*Da'at Mikra: Psalms* vol. 1 [Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1979], introduction, p. 3) observes that in some old manuscripts of Psalms, several lines separate each book, like in the Torah.
2. Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:1) derives a positive commandment to pray from verses in the Torah, whereas other authorities maintain that prayer is generally a rabbinic commandment. The Sages also derive a positive commandment for the Grace after Meals from Deuteronomy 8:10, "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you."
3. For example, *Bava Batra* 14b–15a, *Song of Songs Rabbah* 4:4.
4. Uriel Simon (*Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham ibn Ezra* [New York: SUNY Press, 1991], p. 184) assumes that Ibn Ezra erred in his quotation of the talmudic passage in *Bava Batra* because Ibn Ezra frequently wandered and did not have access to his library. At any rate, Ibn Ezra's view fundamentally approaches that of *Song of Songs Rabbah*.
5. Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, introduction p. ix; pp. 8, 11.
6. Rabbi Tanhum HaYerushalmi (13th century, Egypt) adopts a similar approach. He maintains that Psalm 137, and several lamentations, especially in book 3, were composed during the Babylonian exile. Like Rabbi Moshe ibn Gikatilla, he assumed that Asaph or the Sons of Korah can refer to their descendants (Aryeh Tzoref, "Tanhum HaYerushalmi and Rabbi Moshe ben Gikatilla on the Superscriptions of the Psalms and Their Authors" [Hebrew], *Sinai* 149 [2016], pp. 73–91).
7. Yoshi Farajun notes that in the first edition of Malbim's commentary on Psalms, this footnote did not appear. Farajun surmises that Malbim added it later in response to criticism of his idea from more conservative rabbis (in Yehudah Brandes, Tovah Ganzel, Hayutah Deutsch editors, *BeEnei Elohim VaAdam: HaAdam HaMa'amin UMehkar HaMikra* [Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Beit Morasha, 2015], p. 78, n. 143).
8. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Psalms* vol. 1, pp. 9–13.
9. Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (Oxford, Portland OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), pp. 15–16, 32–35, 39, 47–51, 61.
10. Christine Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 346.
11. James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), pp. 459–461.
12. For example, Radak and Malbim maintain that Psalms 82–83 were written by a descendant of Asaph based on the content of those psalms which suggests a later date. Rabbi Moshe ibn Gikatilla also considers many of the

psalms ascribed to Asaph or the Sons of Korah to have been composed by their descendants. For example, Psalm 79 is “of Asaph” but appears to reflect the period of the destruction of the Temple.

13. For example, Tosafot (*Yevamot* 64b) are bothered by Psalm 90:10, “The span of our life is seventy years, or, given the strength, eighty years.” If Moses authored this psalm and lived to 120, why would he offer an average life expectancy of seventy or eighty? The Tosafists therefore consider this verse a later addition by David, who lived to be seventy. Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Meiri are not bothered by this question, since Moses could say that most people still live to seventy or eighty, rather than 120. Malbim also maintains that Psalm 53 is modeled after Psalm 14 but was updated slightly by Hezekiah.
14. Hakham, *Da’at Mikra: Psalms* vol. 1, introduction, p. 49.
15. Hakham, *Da’at Mikra: Psalms* vol. 1, p. 181, n. 4.
16. Hakham, *Da’at Mikra: Psalms* vol. 2, p. 606.