

The Psalter

Hebrew: *Tehillim* means hymns. *Mizmor*, a song of praise with accompaniment. *Maskil*, instruction.

Greek: *Psalterion* is a stringed instrument

Outline

Introduction	Psalms 1-2	
Book 1	Psalms 3-41	<i>Attributed to David</i>
Book 2	Psalms 42-72	<i>Attributed to the Sons of Korah (temple cantors), Psalm 72 is attributed to Solomon</i>
Book 3	Psalms 73-89	<i>Attributed to Asaph (1 Ch. 6.31-33, 37, 39)</i>
Book 4	Psalms 90-106	<i>Psalm 90 attributed to Moses, 101 & 103 to David</i>
Book 5	Psalms 107-150	<i>Psalms 138-145 attributed to David</i>

Literary Genres

Psalms of entreaty – individual (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10), or communal (107, 115, 125, 129, 136)

Thanksgiving psalms – individual (9-10, 30, 32, 34, 40), communal or national (65-67, 75, 105-107, 118)

Hymns or psalms of praise (2, 21, 45-48, 65-68, 72, 76, 78, 93-99, 105, 110, 120-134*)

Wisdom psalms (1, 34, 37, 49, 78, 112, 119, 127, 128)

Thematic

Introductory - (Psalter: 1-2, God's mighty deeds: 90-92, Hallel: 111-112, Davidic: 137)

Yahwist - ["LORD"] (3-41, Sons of Korah: 84-85, 87-88, Davidic: 86)

Elohist - ["God"] (Sons of Korah: 42-49, Davidic: 51-72, Psalms of Asaph: 50, 73-83)

Royal - (89, 93-100) and messianic psalms (2, 72, 110 – most quoted in NT)

Mosaic? - (90-103)

God's power in creation and history (101-110)

The Hallel for major feast days (113-118)

Meditation on **the Word of God** (119) *prepares for Songs of Ascents*

***Songs of Ascents** - (120-134) *Gradual psalms for pilgrims ascending the steps of the temple*

Liturgical - (135-136) **The Great Hallel** (136), which means *great chant of praise*

Psalms of David - (138-145) *Exile prayers*

Alleluia psalms - (The Hallel: 113-118, and the final psalms: 146-150, which reinforce the purpose of the Psalter, to praise God)

Concerning the Psalter (from the Book of Common Prayer, page 582)

The Psalter is a body of liturgical poetry. It is designed for vocal, congregational use, whether by singing or reading. There are several traditional methods of psalmody. The exclusive use of a single method makes the recitation of the Psalter needlessly monotonous. The traditional methods, each of which can be elaborate or simple, are the following:

Direct recitation denotes the reading or chanting of a whole psalm, or portion of a psalm, **in unison**. It is particularly appropriate for the psalm verses suggested in the lectionary for use between the Lessons at the Eucharist, when the verses are recited rather than sung, and may often be found a satisfactory method of chanting them.

Antiphonal recitation is the **verse-by-verse alternation between groups of singers or readers**; e.g., between choir and congregation, or between one side of the congregation and the other. The

alternate recitation concludes either with the Gloria Patri, or with a refrain (called the antiphon) recited in unison. This is probably the most satisfying method for reciting the psalms in the Daily Office.

Responsorial recitation is the name given to a method of psalmody in which the verses of a psalm are sung **by a solo voice, with the choir and congregation singing a refrain after each verse or group of verses.** This was the traditional method of singing the Venite, and the restoration of Invitatory Antiphons for the Venite makes possible a recovery of this form of sacred song in the Daily Office. It was also a traditional manner of chanting the psalms between the Lessons at the Eucharist, and it is increasingly favored by modern composers.

Responsive recitation is the method which has been most frequently used in Episcopal churches, the **minister alternating with the congregation, verse by verse.** The version of the Psalms which follows is set out in lines of poetry. The lines correspond to Hebrew versification, which is not based on meter or rhyme, but on parallelism of clauses, a symmetry of form and sense. The parallelism can take the form of similarity (The waters have lifted up, O Lord / the waters have lifted up their voice; / the waters have lifted up their pounding waves. Psalm 93:4), or of contrast (The Lord knows the ways of the righteous; / but the way of the wicked is doomed. Psalm 1:6), or of logical expansion (Our eyes look to the Lord our God, / until he show us his mercy. Psalm 123:3).

The most common verse is a couplet, but triplets are very frequent, and quatrains are not unknown; although quatrains are usually distributed over two verses.

An **asterisk** divides each verse into two parts for reading or chanting. In reading, a distinct pause should be made at the asterisk. **[Note: the asterisk is not the breaking point for antiphonal or responsorial recitation.]**

Three terms are used in the Psalms with reference to God: Elohim ("God"), Adonai ("Lord") and the personal name YHWH. The "Four-letter Name" (Tetragrammaton) is probably to be vocalized Yahweh; but this is by no means certain, because from very ancient times it has been considered too sacred to be pronounced; and, whenever it occurred, Adonai was substituted for it. In the oldest manuscripts, the Divine Name was written in antique and obsolete letters; in more recent manuscripts and in printed Bibles, after the invention of vowel points, the Name was provided with the vowels of the word Adonai. This produced a hybrid form which has been transliterated "Jehovah."

The Hebrew reverence and reticence with regard to the Name of God has been carried over into the classical English versions, the Prayer Book Psalter and the King James Old Testament, where it is regularly rendered "Lord". In order to distinguish it, however, from "Lord" as a translation of Adonai, YHWH is represented in capital and small capital letters: LORD.

From time to time, the Hebrew text has Adonai and YHWH in conjunction. Then, the Hebrew custom is to substitute Elohim for YHWH, and our English tradition follows suit, rendering the combined title as "Lord GOD."

In two passages (Psalm 68:4 and Psalm 83:18), the context requires that the Divine Name be spelled out, and it appears as YAHWEH. A similar construction occurs in the canticle, "The Song of Moses."

The ancient praise-shout, "Hallelujah," has been restored, in place of its English equivalent, "Praise the Lord." The Hebrew form has been used, rather than the Latin form "Alleluia," as being more appropriate to this context; but also to regain for our liturgy a form of the word that is familiar from its use in many well-known anthems. The word may, if desired, be omitted during the season of Lent.