

Psalms

1. Name – The English name comes from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT) title *Psalmos*, which was used to translate a Hebrew word that means “to sing” or possibly “to pluck.” The Hebrew title means “praises,” which describes the dominant theme of the book.
2. Author and date – Psalms is an anthology collected over a long period of time. The earliest known psalm is attributed to Moses (Ps. 90), while some seem to have been written after the exile (e.g., Ps. 126). Thus, Psalms was probably composed over 1000 years. David is clearly attested as the author of many of the psalms; several other authors are identified as well.
3. Structure – The book appears to have some organizational structure, but it seems that various psalms and groups of psalms were inserted into this structure rather than being added at the end. For example, Psalm 72 ends with “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.” However, Psalm 72 itself as well as other psalms following Psalm 72 are attributed to David. The book as we have it is made up of 150 separate psalms. Internal evidence shows that some of these psalms that are now separate were actually written as a unified composition. For example, Psalm 9 and 10 form a continuous alphabet acrostic when read together (each verse beginning with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet). Psalm 42 and 43 are also closely related. In general, however, psalms are not connected; contextual information cannot ordinarily be gleaned by looking at surrounding psalms.

Psalms begins with a wisdom psalm, orienting the reader toward the sharp contrast between the righteous and the wicked. The last five psalms end with a crescendo of praise and are traditionally called the Great Doxology. In between, a wide range of styles, emotions, and truths are explored.

4. Titles and attributions – Many of the psalms begin with a title that provides information about the psalms. A great deal of debate has arisen about whether these titles are to be considered part of the inspired text or merely a later explanatory addition. The titles seem to have a similar form even across very different psalms, suggesting that they were added later. Some manuscripts even have different titles. These facts suggest that the titles should not be taken as original or inspired. However, they can be regarded as very early reliable tradition.
5. Interpretation – The psalms record a human response to God, but this does not mean they are unreliable in their teaching about God. Psalms is quoted many times in the NT, often to establish a theological point (e.g., Rom 3:4 citing Ps. 51:4 and Rom. 3:10b-18 citing Ps. 14). Interpreters have often attempted to identify the historical setting of a psalm as a key to its interpretation. However, this approach undermines the psalms as an always-relevant guide to worship. The psalms can be helpfully interpreted by comparing them to other psalms of the same genre.
6. Categories of psalms – The variety of psalms underscore their value to express worship through the full context of human emotions and experiences. They rebuke the modern tendency to think that all singing to the Lord must be happy and up-beat. Seven different genres can be identified in the Psalms:
 - a. Hymns (songs of orientation, e.g. Ps. 146) – the dominant type of psalm in terms of the overall tone of the book, constituting “praises,” exuberant worship of God.
 - b. Laments (songs of disorientation, e.g. Ps. 70) – an expression of sorrow due to enemies, oneself, or God. These are the single most common type of psalm but don’t control the tone of the book.
 - c. Thanksgiving (songs of reorientation, e.g. Ps. 18) – responses to prayers of lament, offering thanks to God.
 - d. Songs of confidence (e.g. Ps. 11) – these express trust in God as protector.
 - e. Songs of remembrance (e.g. Ps. 105) – these recount God’s great redemptive acts.
 - f. Wisdom songs (e.g. Ps. 119) – these express the contrast between the righteous and the wicked.
 - g. Kingship songs (e.g. Ps. 3) – these songs celebrate kingship, both of God and of his anointed, pointing to God’s covenant with David and its ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah.

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.