

Psalms

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The Book of Psalms (sometimes called the Psalter) is one of the most loved and frequently read books of the Old Testament. Because the Hebrew word [מִזְמוֹר](#) originally referred to a song accompanied by a stringed instrument, the English word psalm has come to mean any sacred poem or chant of praise. The Psalms occupy a central place in both Jewish and Christian worship, combining theology with heartfelt emotion and poetic beauty.

King David was the main author, though many psalms are attributed to other figures such as Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, and Moses. The poetry of the Psalms has captivated readers for millennia. Among the best known is [Psalm 23](#), beginning with the enduring words: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

The Psalms express the full range of human experience in direct, personal, and deeply spiritual language. These 150 compositions span the major eras of biblical history: creation; the patriarchal age; the monarchy; the exile; and the postexilic period. They address virtually every aspect of life before God. Their subjects include joy and sorrow, trust and fear, praise and lament, war and peace, repentance and hope. The Psalms were often accompanied by stringed instruments and served as the hymnbook of Israel’s Temple worship as well as a devotional guide for individual prayer.

The collection was assembled gradually over many centuries. Because of the great diversity of its material, it originally circulated without a formal title. In Hebrew, it came to be known as Sepher Tehillim (“Book of Praises”), a fitting description since nearly every psalm contains some expression of praise to God. The Greek Septuagint translators used the term Psalmoi (ψαλμοί), meaning “songs sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments.” From this the Latin Psalterium (“a collection of songs”) and the English word Psalter are derived.

Verse Numbering in the Psalms

The verse numbering of the Psalms differs between the Hebrew Masoretic Text and most English Bible translations due to the treatment of psalm superscriptions (headings). In the Hebrew Bible, the superscriptions (short introductions such as “A psalm of David” or “For the director of music”) are considered part of the inspired text and are counted as the opening verse or verses of the psalm. By contrast, most English translations, present these superscriptions as unnumbered titles. As a result, psalms that contain a heading show a one-verse discrepancy between Hebrew and English numbering. In psalms with longer superscriptions (for example, Psalm 51), the difference may reach two verses.

Approximately 116 of the 150 psalms contain such headings, meaning that in most cases, the Hebrew numbering runs one verse ahead of the English. Only about 34 psalms (those without superscriptions) have identical verse numbering in both traditions.

This variation affects citation and cross-reference practices. For instance, the Hebrew Psalm 51:12 ("Create in me a clean heart, O God") corresponds to Psalm 51:10 in English Bibles. Modern study tools and interlinear editions typically retain each tradition's internal numbering, leading to parallel but not identical verse divisions.

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