

# The Psalms as Praise

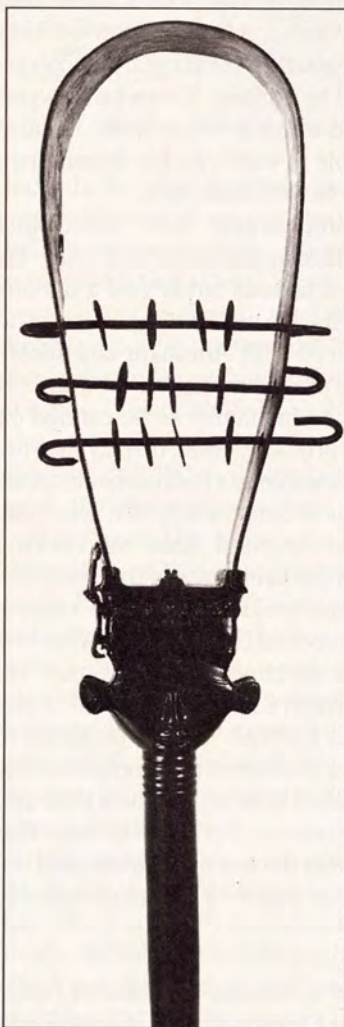


**Below:** Lady with tambourine. Tambourines were used extensively in worship experiences in Israel and other near-eastern countries.

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**Above:** Neo-Attic relief of a woman playing a lyre (2nd century B.C.). Lyre's of various shapes and sizes were mentioned in several Psalms as musical instruments that were used in worship.

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Billy K. Smith

**T**HE HEBREW TITLE OF THE BOOK of Psalms is "Praises" (*tehillim*). This term comes from the same verbal root as *hallelujah*, which means "praise the Lord." In the entire Book of Psalms only Psalm 145 has *tehillah* (*praise*) in the title. The term occurs 28 times in the Psalter. The fact that praise and thanksgiving are recurring themes in the Psalter makes *tehillim* (*praises*) an appropriate title.

The work of Herman Gunkel early in this century marked the turning point of psalm interpretation. He classified the psalms according to their literary types, and he sought to reconstruct their situations in life. He distinguished six types, the first of which was hymns of praise.

The major Israelite festivals formed the background of most of the psalms. These festivals were the primary occasions for most Israelites to worship in the temple. Singing psalms was a significant part of their worship experiences. Hymns of praise represent the worshipers' response to God's works. Any situation where God's works in creation or in salvation were represented could provide a setting for the use of hymns of praise.

Most hymns of praise have three parts: introduction,

**Left:** Bronze Sistrum with restored rods and discs. This late Egyptian (after 850 B.C.) musical instrument was used in worship of several gods. The frame of the instrument bears finely chased representations of deities and divine creatures. **Above:** Neo-Babylonian seal imprint of a royal worship scene.

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main section, and conclusion. The introduction usually begins with a call to praise God. This imperative call to praise God may be expanded by stating the object of praise (Ps. 150:1) or by a description of the people who are to offer praise (Ps. 134:1).

The main section gives the grounds for the introductory exhortation. Often this section begins with the word *for* or *because* (*ki*). Examples are Psalms 33:4; 89:2. Another typical feature of the main section is the use of participles usually translated as relative clauses (Ps. 103:3-5). The main section may contain descriptions of certain actions, deeds, or qualities of the Lord (Ps. 29:3-10).

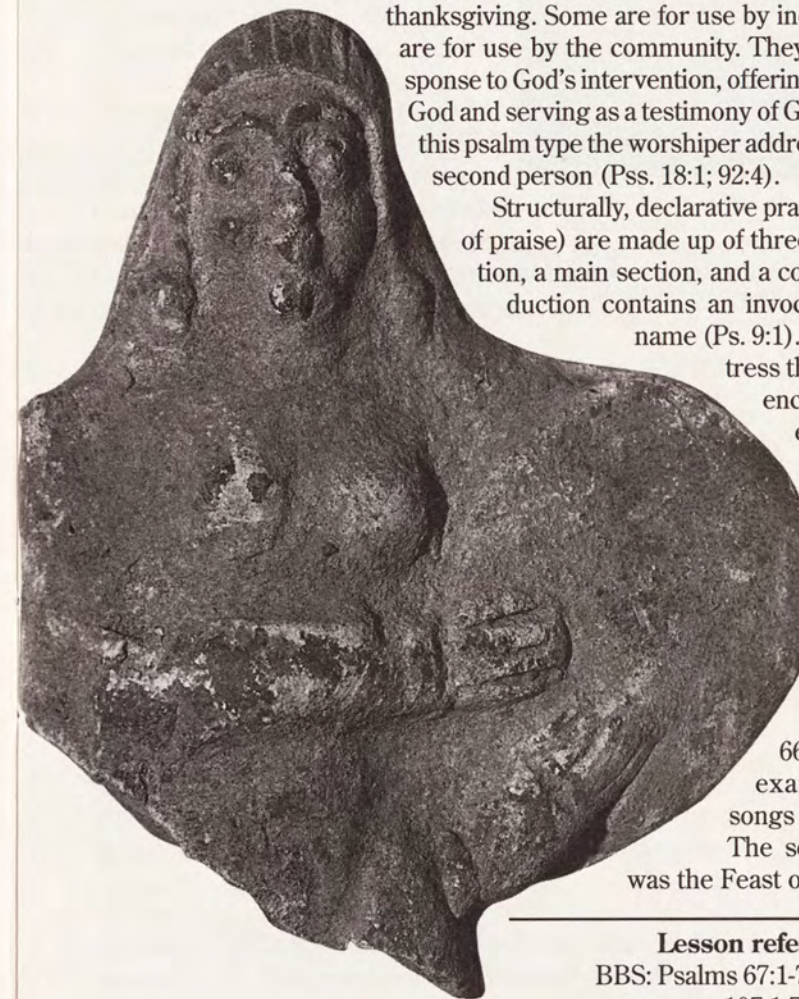
The conclusion of the hymn of praise often repeats the introductory call to praise (Pss. 8:1,9; 136:1,26). It may end with a prayer (Pss. 19:14; 29:11).

The aim of the hymn of praise is to declare the Lord's greatness manifested in nature and in the history of Israel. God is the subject of these hymns. His nature and His mighty deeds are usually spoken of in the third person.

Declarative praises are better known as songs of thanksgiving. Some are for use by individuals, and some are for use by the community. They are humanity's response to God's intervention, offering praise or thanks to God and serving as a testimony of God's saving work. In this psalm type the worshiper addresses God directly in second person (Pss. 18:1; 92:4).

Structurally, declarative praises (like the hymns of praise) are made up of three parts: an introduction, a main section, and a conclusion. The introduction contains an invocation of the Lord's name (Ps. 9:1). Accounts of the distress the worshiper experienced and of the deliverance the Lord accomplished are the essential components of the main section (Ps. 32:3-7). Often the conclusion contains an invitation to praise the Lord (Ps. 116:19). Psalms 66:8-12; 124; 129 are examples of national songs of thanksgiving.

The setting for Psalm 67 was the Feast of Tabernacles at the



**Lesson reference:**  
BBS: Psalms 67:1-7; 75:1-3,7-9;  
107:1-7

end of the agricultural year. Thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest (Ps. 67:6) is overshadowed by the blessing of God's presence in the midst of His people. The chief blessing of God's presence was the manifestation of His salvation (Ps. 67:2). The psalm is a prayer for God's presence to bless His people.

"Be gracious to us" is an appeal to God's unmerited favor (Ps. 67:1, NASB). The entire verse seems to be derived from the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6:24-27. By placement in the sentence, *God* is emphatic. A living relationship with God Himself is the supreme good for human beings. That is the prayer wish of the verse.

Blessing was not an independent force. Rather it was the personal help of God. One could not have the blessing of God without the Giver of the blessing. The chief blessing was God. Included in His presence to bless were such material things as increase in the fields and flocks (Deut. 28:2-14) and success in all undertakings (Ps. 115:12-15).

The prayer for God's face to shine toward the petitioner is a request for God to show him favor (Prov. 16:15). Restoration of a strained relationship between God and humankind may be the particular favor sought. The outcome hoped for from God's unmerited favor and blessing was the revelation of God's ways and of God's salvation among the nations (Prov. 16:2).

For God's presence, grace, and salvation, He is due the praise of His people and of all the nations (Ps. 67:3; Prov. 16:3-4). The true purpose uniting Israel and the other nations in one worshiping community was the offering of praise to God. The term translated "praise" may be rendered "thanksgiving." The nations are to rejoice in God's upright judgment (or rule) and in His guidance (Ps. 67:4).

God's presence to bless the "earth" is the explanation for its bountiful harvest (Ps. 67:6). God's blessing works gratitude in some people and fear in others. "Fear" is an attitude of reverence and awe (67:7) or an attitude of dread and trembling. Here the former idea is the prayer wish of the petitioner.

Psalm 75 is a community thanksgiving. The worshipers address God directly in second person to give thanks. They recount God's "wonderful deeds," but the particular blessing for which they express thanks is God's upright judgment (Ps. 75: 2). At His appointed time for judgment, He pledged to intervene. *I* is emphatic in the expression "I will

judge uprightly" (Ps. 75:2). The meaning is that none other than God will bring about justice and equity.

God's just judgment brings down one person and exalts another (Ps. 75:7). The wicked will receive their due punishment to the full (Ps. 75:8). The speaker who represents the congregation vows to tell of God's just judgment forever and to sing praises to the God of Jacob (Ps. 75:9).

Psalm 107 consists of a thanksgiving (Ps. 107:1-32) and a praise to the Lord (Ps. 107:33-42). The first part of the psalm is an introductory call to give thanks to the Lord (Ps. 107:1-3). That is followed by expressions of gratitude by four different groups: travelers (vv. 4-9), released prisoners (vv. 10-16), recently healed persons (vv. 17-22), and seafarers (vv. 23-32).

Each group's thanksgiving follows the same pattern: the distress, the prayer to the Lord, the deliverance, and thankfulness.

The distress of the travelers was brought on by their wandering in desert wastelands unable to find their way to a suitable place to settle (Ps. 107:4). Reference may be to travelers coming out of Egyptian bondage or to exiles returning from Babylon. Scarcity of food and water was so severe their lives were in jeopardy (Ps. 107:5). In desperation they cried unto the Lord (Ps.

107:6a), and He "delivered them" (literally, "He snatched them") from their distress (Ps. 107:6).

The Lord led the lost travelers by the straightest (shortest) route to an inhabited city (Ps. 107:7). Safe and settled travelers are exhorted to offer thanks for God's "unfailing love" (*chesed*) and for His wonderful deeds. He regularly satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with "goodness" (107:9).

Modern worshipers of the Lord should be able to enter into the expressions of praise offered by the ancient psalmist. We can praise God that His ways have been made known throughout the earth and His salvation among all nations. Hallelujah! We can praise God for His just judgment. We can celebrate His fairness and equity. From our own desert wastelands of sin, God has guided us to a safe and suitable haven. We can praise God for His unfailing love. ○

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**Above:** Horizontal harp. This stringed instrument was often carried in processions as scenes on plaques and reliefs show. These had many strings and were ornamented with tassels. This instrument can be compared with the modern dulcimer.

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