



Individual Laments & Thanksgiving

By far the largest grouping of Psalms, Individual Laments account for 50 of the 150 psalms in the psalter. Given that the psalter was used for worship in the First and Second Temple periods as well as moving forward into Judaism and Christianity, scholars believe individual laments were psalms sung by the person or family with the assistance of a priest in the Temple. An example of this can be found in the story of Hannah talking and praying with Eli, 1 Samuel 1.

Over time these psalms became incorporated into personal prayer outside of Temple worship.

Individual Psalms of Lament, or petition generally followed a basic pattern, though this pattern might not be in order from start to finish. The call to God was quick and short, usually “Oh God (YHWH) or “Lord” (Elohim). Then there was a statement of bravery, that whatever might happen the person singing this psalm was not afraid and would face it with a strength God would be proud to witness. Thirdly, there would be the petition itself, the salvation or assistance they have come to ask of God. Finally there was a statement of praise, acknowledging that God was always there and they never doubted that support.

Addressing the psalm in such short verse to God was unique amongst the people living around the Mediterranean. All of those cultures had psalms and temple worship, but for the most part addressing the specific god they were speaking to was an elaborate process, usually identifying them from the pantheon of choices. Hebrew Temple worship only had one God, and there was a much closer connection in their relationship with God, so the address was more of that of a

respected friend or colleague than an extensive formal monologue of identification and glorifying.

There is also a distinct first person perspective in these psalms that is missing in psalms and worship songs found in other cultures. This strengthens the argument that the Hebrews had a very personal, almost familial relationship with God, and saw God as part of their intimate lives. There was no sense of appeasing a judging God that created humans for amusement, as is found in other cultures, but a God who is a co-worker, one who made them for relationship.

Another element in some of the Individual Psalms of Lament is the reference to weeping or mourning. Scholars believe this was both a way to show the emotion of the psalm, given there is no way of hearing how it was actually presented in the Temple periods, and a way of encouraging emotion support from witnesses or passers-by who heard a psalm sung.



Hannah and Eli, 1
Samuel 1

Sheol is a common word found in lament psalms, meaning an underground pit. There were many ideas about the afterlife in the Bible and the Talmud (additional writings by Hebrew scholars and Jewish rabbis), but none of them were consistently held across the Hebraic tradition. There were different opinions about whether Sheol was for everyone or just some, or if it was for a short time or forever, but one of the consistent themes is that a person in Sheol was cut off from God.

Individual Laments - 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 94, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, 143,

Psalms 3 & 4 we can almost hear the parts that were spoken by the individual and the response of the priests giving reassurances of God's steadfast love.

Psalms 6 gives an example of weeping being used to build compassion from others but also to give a sense of the deep pain of the originator of the psalm.

Psalm 13 is a clear example of the act of lament, begging God to hear and do something about the writer's anguish. The writer displays strong emotion and gets quickly into the issue at hand rather than spending a lot of time on addressing God. As with all lament psalms, they move from making a plea to God, to offering praise and always end by telling God they believe their pleas will be heard.

Psalm 22 is recognized by Christians as beginning with the words Jesus utters on the cross in both Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:32. One of the regular aspects of Matthew particularly is quoting parts of Hebrew Scriptures and expecting the listeners or readers to recognize enough that it fills in the significance of the Hebrew scriptures into Matthew's story, giving a richer historical and spiritual context. This psalm asks that God stay with the person and keep them from suffering, it does not speak of rescue, which underscores why this psalm was used for Jesus on the cross.

Psalm 94 is particularly gruesome in its call for vengeance and destruction. It doesn't fit with modern sensibilities and these types of passages are used by many anti-Christian advocates to suggest God supports violence and is not the God of love we claim. These can be hard to read due to their obvious passion, but it is best to remember this is the feeling of a people being conquered and exiled. Psalms and readings like these do not come from a place of peace or time for deeper reflection.

Psalm 120 refers to being an alien in Meshach, who was a son of Japheth (son of Noah), and Kedar, who was a son of Ishmael. Both are references to people, and their lands, of those outside of Hebrew culture and thus outside the covenant relationship with God.

Psalm 140 is a complaint relatable to most of us, against fellow worshippers who are perceived as telling lies and gossiping about the writer.

Psalm 143 is the last lament in the psalter. Beginning with Psalm 144 we have the final doxologies. Interestingly, in the opening of Psalm 143 the psalmist notes that no one living is righteous before God. It contrasts many of the psalms that list all the ways the writer will make themselves better of God saves them from their enemies or torment.

Individual Psalms of Thanksgiving - 30, 34, 41, 66, 92, 111, 116, 118, 138,

Individual Psalms of Thanksgiving had a different expression than the Individual Psalms of Lament or Petition. While the two are written generally in the first person, the Psalms of Thanksgiving were not personal prayers but communal songs of individual experiences. They were the vehicle of

thanks and assurance to others that God had indeed worked in the individual's life and did what they had been asking.

Psalm 30 is the song of someone who has been ill and has overcome their sickness. It shows the situation they were in, their request of God, the celebration of their success - in this case renewed health - then the assurances to others that they can have this experience too. Interestingly, one of the 'winning' arguments from the perspective of the person singing this psalm, is the claim that if they die, how would their grave give God praise.

There is still a punitive understanding of God, found in v. 5, where the psalmist acknowledges that God was angry and giving punishment. Ancient cultures often associated loss, illness and death with God's anger and punitive responses.

Psalm 66 is most likely Second Temple. First for its length, longer pieces tend to be more recent. Secondly, it references the experiences of the Exodus (v. 6), a story codified during and after the Babylonian Exile. The narrative shows the definitive moment in the spiritual history of the Hebrew people. From there we read an extensive list of how this individual will offer praise to God through expensive animal sacrifices, suggesting this is a wealthier member of society.

Psalm 118 we see a reference to the house of Aaron (v. 3), which means the cast of priests. It is hard to establish why this psalm is being sung, although the sense of military victory over their neighbours is a strong motif.

A line that jumps out for Christians is v. 22, "the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone". This was spoken by Jesus in Matthew 21:42, another example of the writer of Matthew quoting the Hebrew scriptures to show Jesus is a continuation of the stories of Moses and Elijah, not a replacement.



Shofar or keren yobel - a ram or goat's horn
