



Festival Songs, Hymns & Liturgy

A word before we begin...

Throughout much of the Hebrew Scriptures there is an us/them mentality that doesn't fit our 21st century sensibility. When reading the Hebrew Scriptures it is important to remember they were almost always writing as an oppressed people without political power or self-determination. This is important to remember, especially when we get into the less generous Psalms that call for violence against their enemies. Those were not historical experiences that were acted upon, those were revenge fantasies from people who would never get the opportunity to stand up for themselves.

Entrance Hymns - 15, 24

Entrance psalms were used as worshippers approached the Temple. They used a call and response model, and in Psalm 15 one can see where the worshippers asked who was welcome on the hill of the Lord (Temple in Jerusalem), and the priest inside sang out their response. It involved a list of behaviours and choices that were ethical and noble, such as honesty, don't loan money at interest, don't bribe anyone, and generally do the right thing. Once the priest had responded with the list of appropriate behavioural expectations, the people responded with a word of blessing for those who had been found worthy. Scholars believe Psalm 15 was written before the exiles, and was part of the First Temple worship.

Psalm 24 is longer and more involved than Psalm 15. In Psalm 24 we find three sections, the first that praises God, the second that mirrors quite strongly the language of Psalm 15, and the final part

which is a call and response model asking for entry. Aside from probably being written later than Psalm 15, there is no way to tell when Psalm 24 was written and sung. However, referencing gates that needing to be opened, it was likely written after a period of fortification of Jerusalem.

Psalm 24 includes the term “Selah”. This is a break in the psalm, possibly a time for an instrumental intermission.

Prophetic Hymns - 50, 81, 82

The prophetic hymns recount God’s relationship with the Hebrew people, how they turn away from God’s teachings and yet God is still respecting the covenantal promises to be there for them. The call is to return to the teachings and lifestyle God has requested they follow. Like the prophetic texts in other books in the Hebrew Scriptures, the behavioural problems are called out and God promises punishment if they do not return to God and follow God’s commands.

Psalm 50 shows God’s reaction to burnt offerings (I could get anything I want, what makes you think this pleases me?), as well as dishonesty and slander in those pretending to follow God’s expectations. These are age old issues in the Abrahamic traditions - the kind of worship God expects and what do we do about people who claim to believe but whose behaviour does not fall in line with God’s expectations. Religious traditions are still struggling to find answers.



Make a joyful noise, all the earth, worship your God with gladness. Make a joyful noise all the earth, come to this place with a song. Know that your God has made you, know it’s to God we belong. And come to this place with joyfulness and praise, worship your God with a song.

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Psalm 82, possibly the oldest of this lot, shows a time when polytheism was the assumption. The messaging is that the Hebrew God, YHWH (mis-translated as Jehovah in Latin) is first among the gods, and concern for the vulnerable should be what the ‘council of gods’ focuses on rather than the continued suffering of the marginalized while the privilege benefit. The call is for the Hebrew God to stand up to do the right thing regardless, because ultimately the Hebrew God is the true god.

Many are uncomfortable with the realization that the early Hebrews lived in a world of polytheism, meaning while they had the Hebrew God as the prime god, they also recognized the power of other gods. This was particularly true with the

Canaanite god Baal. There are several stories throughout the Hebrew Scriptures of the the followers of YHWH working to discredit and destroy all instances of worship of Baal amongst the Hebrew people, culminating in the story of Elijah and Jezebel (1 Kings 18).

Psalms 81 presents us with an historical dilemma. Named as one of the songs of Asaph, the cantor at the time of David, which suggests pre-Assyrian exilic First Temple worship, the imagery presented points to post-Babylonian exile and the Second Temple period. Most of what we recognize and the story of Moses was written by the Judean Priestly class during and after their exile in Babylon, where they picked up a number of concepts including 'ha-satan' (temptation, essential the spiritual trial 'lawyer' who tests the faithful), and the story of the miracle baby floating down the river in a basket (Akkadian king Sargon, 8th century BCE leader of both the Assyrians and Babylonians, with legendary origin story). These concepts were written back into the narratives of Job and the Exile story respectively, and have been treated as historical Hebrew concepts, but they were not.

Another clue to Psalm 81 being more recent is the extensive history given. We see this in Christian worship material as well. The older documents do not have the extensive history lesson that more recent documents contain, possibly because more recent communities needed to be reminded of the these narratives, which were probable already known by older communities.

Regardless of historicity, Psalm 81 follows the same prophetic pattern as 50 and 82, with a call to return to the expectations and teachings of God so they can receive the promises of a great life.

Thanksgiving Hymn - 111

This is the only identified 'thanksgiving' hymn in the Psalter. While there are expressions of thanksgiving throughout the Psalms, this is the only one that is strictly giving thanks from beginning to end. Poetically, it is known as an 'alphabet' psalm, as each line begins with another letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Unfortunately this is lost in an English translation. Scholars suggest this was written in the post-Babylonian exile period, possibly as the Second Temple was being constructed.

General Hymns - 29, 33, 68, 100, 103, 105, 113, 114, 115, 117, 134, 135, 139, 145, 146, 147, 149, 150

Select psalms have been identified below, but the overarching theme of these general hymns is praise for God's action in the lives of God's people and the assurances that God's presence will

always be there, supporting and saving the community. A few psalms make historical nods, but for the most part there is a timeless quality of celebrating our God who is active in the world.

Psalm 105 recounts God's promises to Moses and the Hebrew people to rescue them from Egypt, and how that promise was fulfilled. One of the significant parts of the constant remembering of the escape from Egypt is the reminder that "we endured horrible things in the past, so we can endure this too". That was incredibly important to cultural cohesion for a people who were constantly under siege or outside domination.

Psalm 117 is the shortest in the psalter, but cover all the essential elements of a praise psalm, namely calling everyone to recognize God, the need to praise God, and that God's love has never wavered but is ongoing and endless.

Psalm 139 begins with beautiful imaging of God knowing the writer intimately, all their actions, where they go, who they are and what they dream. The dream part is what makes reading the final segment of this psalm problematic. We are given an image of God's love and interconnectedness, and then the violent images where the author wants death and destruction for their enemies because those are God's enemies as well. Some scholars say the images and expressions are disjointed, but if you start with the understanding first presented in this study guide that revenge fantasies were part of the coping of an oppressed people, there is consistency. The writer of this psalm cannot separate their hope in the future from the destruction of their enemies, and the belief that God will make it right.

Psalm 150 is considered the doxology of the psalter. The entire journey through the book of Psalms has been an emotional ride from personal and group torment to destruction of enemies

to promises of God to care for the people. The psalter began with the wisdom to know how to follow God (Psalm 1 will be reviewed in week three of this study), and ends with absolute praise and worship for God's involvement in the lives of God's people. Hope is a constant throughout the Psalms, and the final psalm reminds people that that hope has not been misplaced.

The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express the same delight in God which made David dance.

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