

Categorizing the Psalms

Matt Postiff, November 25, 2014; some updates over subsequent years.

The Classification System

All the Psalms share the genre of Hebrew poetry. Among the 150 Psalms, there are groups or categories that share the same form and subject matter. These could be called “sub-genres”, but I have elected to call them “categories.” In this article, I provide a categorization of all the Psalms using a simple lettering system.

At the largest granularity, there are six categories of Psalms. I use the six letters shown in the table below to classify the Psalm into these largest of buckets. The task of classification is made more difficult by the fact that some Psalms have strong elements of two or more of these categories. So, I employ a slash (/) to specify a second category, which is encoded in the same way as the first category.

1	2...	/	3	4...
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P – Praise Hymn **S** – Song of Trust **T** – Thanksgiving
L – Lament **W** – Wisdom **K** – Kingship/covenant
 (If there is no slash, I did not give the Psalm a secondary classification.)

The optional second and third letters identify major elements of the content of the Psalm which further classify it. The letters of identification for these additional content elements are briefly defined below.

1	2...	/	3	4...
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A – Allegiance/loyalty **G** – God as Divine King **M** – Imprecatory **T** – Theocratic/Human King
B – Benevolence of God **H** – Lord of History **N** – National **V** – Vindication
C – Creator or Covenant **I** – Individual **P** – Penitential **Z** – Song of Zion
D – Deliverer **J** – God as Judge **R** – Request in prayer

All the Psalms Classified by Category

Psalm	Type	Psalm	Type	Psalm	Type	Psalm	Type	Psalm	Type
1	W	31	LI/S	61	LI/S	91	S	121	S
2	KT	32	TI/W	62	S	92	TI	122	PZ
3	LI/SD	33	PCH/S	63	S	93	KG	123	LP
4	LI/S	34	TI/W	64	LI/S	94	LJ	124	TN
5	LI	35	LIMV?	65	TN	95	KG/PG	125	S
6	LI	36	W/SR	66	TI/TN	96	KGJ	126	LP
7	LI/SJ	37	W	67	PN	97	KG/PG	127	W
8	PC	38	LI	68	P/KG	98	KG/PGJ	128	W
9	PD	39	LI	69	LIM	99	KG/PG	129	TN/LM
10	LIM	40	TID	70	LI	100	PCB	130	LI
11	S	41	LI/SD	71	LI	101	KT	131	S
12	LI	42	LI	72	KT	102	LP	132	KT
13	LI/S	43	LI	73	W/LI/LP	103	PH	133	W
14	LI	44	LN	74	LN	104	PC	134	P
15	W	45	KT	75	TNJ	105	TH	135	PH
16	S	46	PZ	76	PZ	106	TH	136	TN/PH
17	LI/S	47	KG/PG	77	LI/PC	107	TN	137	LPI
18	TI/KT	48	PZ	78	W/PH	108	LP	138	TI
19	PC/W	49	W	79	LP	109	LIM	139	W/P

20	KG (v. 9)	50	KJ	80	LP	110	KT	140	LIM
21	KT	51	LIPN	81	KC	111	PD	141	LI
22	LI/S	52	LI	82	LNP	112	W	142	LI
23	S	53	LI	83	LNLM	113	PH	143	LI
24	KG	54	LI/S	84	PZ	114	PD	144	KT/P
25	LI/W	55	LIM/W	85	LN/P	115	LP	145	P
26	SVA	56	LI/S	86	LI	116	TI	146	P
27	LI/SR	57	LI/S/P	87	PZ	117	PH	147	P
28	LI/S	58	LM/PI	88	LI	118	TI/TN	148	P
29	PC/KG	59	LIM	89	KT	119	W	149	P
30	TI	60	LN/P	90	LPW	120	TI/LI	150	P

A Helpful Mnemonic Device for the Categories of Psalms

This might be helpful for students taking a poetic books test.

P raise hymn
S ong of trust/confidence
Th A nksgiving
L ament
Wisdo M
King S hip and covenant

Definitions and Discussion

The **kingship/covenant** psalms focus on the anointed king of Israel or the future King of kings, in connection with the Davidic covenant. They often contain a heavy element of praise. These could be categorized under ‘P’ with the ‘G’ or ‘T’ sub-classification.

The **thanksgiving** psalms reflect a grateful response to God, often after deliverance from a lament or answer to a prayer.

The **lament** category is large—about one third of the Psalms. These psalms often include elements of the other major categories such as thanksgiving after the lament is resolved by God. A lament is an expression of difficulty, sadness, calamity, persecution, etc.

The **praise** hymn is just what the name indicates: words used in worship and praise of God.

Wisdom psalms focus on the contrast between the righteous (wise) and wicked (fools), and on how to live righteously.

The **song of trust** category contains those psalms that express trust in the Lord, perhaps with reasons why the trust is well-founded.

For the content elements, following is a further description of each:

A – Allegiance/loyalty	The psalmist makes a declaration of loyalty to God.
B – Benevolence of God	Some kindness or goodness of God is mentioned.
C – Creator or Covenant	God is extolled or mention as creator; or, one of the covenants is mentioned.
D – Deliverer	God is extolled as deliverer or savior.
G – God as Divine King	God is remembered as the king of the nation, the theocratic head.
H – Lord of History	God is sovereign over history.
I – Individual	The Psalm is focused on individual concerns (opposite of N below).
J – God as Judge	God is the judge of all.
M – Imprecatory	The psalmist is praying for judgment on his enemies.
N – National	The Psalm is focused on national concerns (opposite of I above).

P – Penitential	The psalmist confesses his own or the nation’s sin.
R – Request in prayer	Some supplication is raised in the psalm.
T – Theocratic/Human King	God’s anointed King is a major subject of the Psalm (89 is an example).
V – Vindication	A request to be vindicated before enemies.
Z – Song of Zion	A song of praise regarding God’s earthly city.

It is difficult to make a clean division between thanksgiving and praise psalms, since thanksgiving overlaps with praise. For example, see Psalm 100:4 where the text calls for thanksgiving, praise, and being thankful in three successive lines.

Many more of these Psalms could be classed with the ‘R’ modifier (request in prayer) because so many psalms are prayer requests. This part of the classification project remains incomplete.

May 2019 reading of Psalms: There seems to be a need for a “prayer of deliverance” category. Also some kind of intercessory or supplication category or element is present in a lot of the psalms. The ‘R’ category is a bit generic.

It is helpful to ask yourself, “Toward whom is the Psalm directed? Is it directed toward man, as in a wisdom teaching or call to worship, or is it directed to God, like a prayer or lamentation?”

Many laments are also calls to hope in God; so it is dissatisfying to leave them as merely “LI.” There should be another sub-category.

Bullock classifies national thanksgiving psalms as those of “community.” This broadens the appeal of the psalm in terms of present-day application, but the authors were always thinking of the nation of Israel as their particular community, not in a broader sense of Gentiles or the church. He also classifies two psalms (66 and 118) as both national and individual thanksgivings. Both elements are present.

Longman suggests a “psalm of remembrance” having to do with redemptive historical topics. He classifies Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136 in this category. However, most of these psalms have a strong element of thanksgiving or praise associated with them so I have categorized them under those headings. The remembrance or historical material in the psalms serve the larger purpose of providing material to report and praise to others (78:4, 105:1-5, 45; 106:1, 48; 135:1-3, 21; 136:1-3, 26) or of conveying wisdom to following generations to not be stiff-necked like prior generations (78).

References

This work was informed and inspired by Dr. Robert McCabe's poetic books notes at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. I also interacted with C. Hassell Bullock's *Encountering the Book of Psalms* as well as Tremper Longman's *How to Read the Psalms*.

Here is a table from the MacArthur Study Bible:

Types of Psalms		
Type	Psalms	Act of Worship
Individual and Communal Lament	3-7; 12; 13; 22; 25-28; 35; 38-40; 42-44; 51; 54-57; 59-61; 63; 64; 69-71; 74; 79; 80; 83; 85; 86; 88; 90; 102; 109; 120; 123; 130; 140-143	Express need for God's deliverance
Thanksgiving	8; 18; 19; 29; 30; 32-34; 36; 40; 41; 66; 103-106; 111; 113; 116; 117; 124; 129; 135; 136; 138; 139; 146-148; 150	Make aware of God's blessings Express thanks
Enthronement	47; 93; 96-99	Describe God's sovereign rule
Pilgrimage	43; 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 120-134	Establish a mood of worship
Royal	2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132; 144	Portray Christ the sovereign ruler
Wisdom	1; 37; 119	Instruct as to God's will
Imprecatory	7; 35; 40; 55; 58; 59; 69; 79; 109; 137; 139; 144	Invoke God's wrath and judgment against His enemies

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