

# Categorizing the Psalms

Matt Postiff, November 21, 2014

## 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 a slash (/) is employed to specify a second category, which is encoded in the same way as the first category.

<b>1</b>	2...	/	<b>3</b>	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 taken from the second group of identifiers below.

1	<b>2...</b>	/	3	<b>4...</b>
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**C** – Creator      **D** – Deliverer      **H** – Lord of History      **G** – God as Divine King  
**I** – Individual      **N** – National      **R** – Request in prayer      **T** – Theocratic/Human King  
**P** – Penitential      **M** – Imprecatory      **Z** – Song of Zion      **C** – Covenant

## All the Psalms Classified by Category

Psalm	Type	Psalm	Type	Psalm	Type	Psalm	Type	Psalm	Type
1	W	31	LI/S	61	LI	91	S	121	S
2	KT	32	TI	62	S	92	TI	122	PZ
3	LI	33	PH	63	S	93	KG	123	LP
4	LI	34	TI	64	LI	94	LP	124	TN
5	LI	35	LIM	65	TN	95	KG/PG	125	S
6	LI	36	W	66	TI/TN	96	KG	126	LP
7	LI	37	W	67	TN	97	KG	127	W
8	PC	38	LI	68	P/KG	98	KG/PG	128	W
9	LI	39	LI	69	LII	99	KG	129	TN/LM
10	LI	40	TI	70	LII	100	PD	130	LI
11	S	41	LI	71	LI	101	KT	131	S
12	LNI	42	LI	72	KT	102	LP	132	KT
13	LI	43	LI	73	W	103	PH	133	W
14	LI	44	LNP	74	LP	104	PC	134	P
15	W	45	KT	75	TN	105	TH	135	PH
16	S	46	PZ	76	PZ	106	TH	136	TN/PH
17	LI	47	KG/PG	77	LI	107	TN	137	LPI
18	TI/KT	48	PZ	78	W/PH	108	LP	138	TI
19	PC/W	49	W	79	LP	109	LII	139	W/P
20	KT	50	KC	80	LP	110	KT	140	LIM

21	KT	51	LIP	81	KC	111	PD	141	LI
22	LI	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	55	LI	85	LN/P	115	LP	145	P
26	LIR	56	LI/S	86	LI	116	TI	146	P
27	S	57	LI	87	PZ	117	PH	147	P
28	LI	58	LN/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	LP	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

## Discussion

The kingship psalms often contain a heavy element of praise. Perhaps they should be categorized under ‘P’ with the ‘K’ sub-classification.

The thanksgiving psalms often reflect a response to deliverance from a lament or answer to a prayer.

It is difficult to make a clean division between thanksgiving and praise psalms, since thanksgiving overlaps with praise.

The lament category is large—about one third of the Psalms. These psalms often include elements of the other major categories.

Bullock classifies national thanksgiving psalms as those of “community.” This broadens the appeal of the psalm in terms of application, but the authors were always thinking of the nation of Israel as their particular community. He also classifies two psalms (66 and 118) as both national and individual thanksgivings. I agree both elements are present.

Longman suggests a “psalm of remembrance” having to do with redemptive historical issues. 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 is derived from Dr. Robert McCabe’s poetic books notes from 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*.