Psalms

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Psalms

The title of a book of religious songs and poems of praise and prayer poems in the Hebrew Bible to which, according to most interpretations, reference is made in the Qur'an. It is called Tehillim in rabbinical Hebrew (lit. "songs of praise") with the connotation in post-exilic Bible books of "songs of Temple worship"; psalm is Greek for "a song sung to a harp." One of the common words for this kind of composition found in the book of Psalms itself is mizmōs, which is related to the Arabic mizān, "single-pipe woodwind instrument resembling the oboe," and mazmūs.

"psalm." The Hebrew psalms were not all composed at the same time but — because they exist in Greek translation — they must date back to at least the second half of the second century B.C.E. The so-called Davidic psalms constituted the very first stage in the compilation of the Hebrew book of Psalms.

Although the various versions of the book of Psalms consist of 149, 150 or 151 psalms, 150 seems to be the ideal number because the Greek version contains an additional psalm which is considered super-numerary, that is, Psalm 151 which is also marked as apocryphal. The book of Psalms is divided into five chapters or books, each comprising a number of psalms. Each of the first four books is marked off by a doxology or formulaic expression of praise to God, for instance, "Blessed is the Lord, from eternity to eternity," "Blessed be the Lord into eternity," or "Amen and amen."

There are several genres to be distinguished in the Psalms: the leading one is the hymn. Some psalms specifically extol God's royal role in the universe, his city, and his Torah (q.v.). About one third of the Psalter is devoted to laments in which the speaker may be either the individual or the community (faced with national oppression or misfortune) making a strong plea for divine help. Those songs in which one is sure of God's help are called "psalms of confidence." There is also the genre of thanksgiving. The "royal psalms," in which the center of attention is the anointed one (Messiah) of God, the earthly king of Israel, and which contain no direct reference to a reigning monarch, constitute a separate class. Another genre derives from wisdom literature; psalms of this type may be reflective or sententious. The contents are often linked to particular situations such as repentance for the sins of the poet, or thanksgiving to the lord for liberating the poet from his enemies (see GRATITUDE AND INGRATITUDE).

The mixing of genres to be found in the Psalms is paralleled in the Qur'an, which is not a homogeneous collection but a combination of many genres whose stāras (q.v.) are often mixed compositions (see FORM AND STRUCTURE OF THE QUR'AN). A comparison of the two holy books — the Hebrew Psalms and the Arabic Qur'an — makes us aware of the complex composition of these sacred scriptures: individual genres such as hymns, wisdom sentences, prophetic sayings, each genre has its vocabulary and form.
The book of five chapters or a number of the first four books is of a number of the Qur'an, where the zabur "the book of Psalms granted by God to David" (Q 4:163; 17:55), is recognized as a holy scripture preceding the Qur'an (see scripture and the Qur'an).

Legendary authors of psalms were the kings David (q.v.) and, to a lesser extent, Solomon (q.v.), and sometimes the situation of the poet in the psalms can be linked to events that took place during David's lifetime. The book of Psalms was considered as "the writings of David." Musical-recitative accompaniment is attributed to Davidic innovation (2 Chron 23:18). According to the Talmud, the Psalms were inspired (Pes. 117a) and music helped to supply the inspiration: "A harp was suspended above the bed of David. When midnight came the north wind blew on it and it produced music of its own accord. Immediately David arose and occupied himself with the Torah.... Until midnight he occupied himself with the Torah; and from then with songs and praises." In Islamic literature, the tradition that David devoted himself to the Torah is also mentioned by al-Tabarî (d. ca. 292/905) and al-Tabarl are especially important. Even though both probably based their works upon texts derived from the same sources (cf. Tha'labi-Brinner, Lives, 462-81), the works of these two men are strikingly independent of each other.

Al-Ya'qubi's has a long passage about David (cf. Ebied and Wickham, Al-Ya'qubi's account, 87-91 for an Eng. trans. of al-Ya'qubi's text on David). He is portrayed as the successor to Saul (q.v.) and as subduing the Philistines. The affair with Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan's words of reproach to David are mentioned, the child he had with Bathsheba being the later king, Solomon. The family affairs with his brothers are described more or less according to the Bible, such as the revolt

sentences, prophecies and poetry are combined, each genre having its own style, vocabulary and formal language (see language and style of the Qur'an). Some sense of this similarity is captured in the Qur'an, where the zabur, "the book of Psalms granted by God to David" (Q 4:163; 17:55), is recognized as a holy scripture preceding the Qur'an (see scripture and the Qur'an).

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the rule of the kingdom (see kings and rulers), knowledge (šin; see knowledge and learning) and wisdom (q.v.; hikma), and the ability to do justice (hukm, esp. Q 21:76 f.; cf. 38:20-4, 26; see justice and injustice). God made the birds and mountains his servants, so that they unite in his praise (Q 21:79; 34:110; 38:18 f.). There is no mention of the wrong David did to Uriah in order to win Bathsheba's affection, but some Qur'anic verses show that the king feels himself to be guilty. His prayer for forgiveness (q.v.) is heard (Q 38:24 f.).

The hadith (accounts of Muhammad's deeds and sayings) stress David's zeal in prayer (q.v.) and especially in fasting (q.v.) and his readiness to do penance (see repentance and penance). Another favorite theme is David's gift in singing psalms. His voice has magical power over not only humans but also over wild beasts and inanimate nature (see magic). In other Islamic literature, such as that of Qur'an commentators, historians and compilers of the "tales of the prophets," the works of the two historians al-Ya'qubî (d. ca. 292/905) and al-Tabarl are especially important. Even though both probably based their works upon texts derived from the same sources (cf. Tha'labi-Brinner, Lives, 462-81), the works of these two men are strikingly independent of each other.
by his son Absalom, who is killed by Yoab. Contrary to the biblical version, in al-Ya'qūbī’s text Barzillay marched against David and when God saved David from his hands, David recited a psalm. This psalm is reported in Arabic and is very similar to Psalm 18, in which he thanks God for having saved him from his enemies. There then follows an Arabic rendition of Psalm 1, which begins “Blessed are the ones who do not follow the path of the sinners.” Other laudatory psalms are quoted in Arabic, reflecting, respectively, Psalms 148, 149 and 150. Then the apocryphal Psalm 151 is also quoted in Arabic. This psalm is conceived as highly autobiographical: in it David tells us that he was the youngest among his brethren, herded the sheep of his father and cut flutes from reed. But God sent his angels and took him away from his sheep and from his brethren and destined him to fight Goliath (q.v.). David killed this worshipper of idols by cutting off his head with his own sword. After this passage, al-Ya'qūbī deals with David’s old age and Solomon, David’s successor.

Al-Ṭabarī collects the comments of early qur’ānic exegetes (see exegesis of the qur’ān: classical and medieval) in his Ta’rikh (his history of the world). In this work, he explains David’s connection with the Psalms thus:

When the Israelites gathered around David, God revealed the Psalms to him, and taught him ironworking, making it supple for him. He also ordered the mountains and the birds to sing praise with him when he sang. According to what they have mentioned, God did not give anyone in his creation a voice like his. So when David recited the Psalms, wild beasts would gaze at him with delight, until they were lined up, intently listening upon hearing his voice. The demons invented flutes, lutes and cymbals with only his voice as a model. David was extremely diligent, constant in worship (q.v.) and wept much (Ta’rikh, i, 562; Eng. trans. History, iii, 143; see weeping).

Al-Ṭabarī incorporates Qur’ān as well as hadith passages into his Ta’rikh; among them is q. 38:17-8, in which God describes David to Muhammad, saying: “And remember our servant David, possessor of might. Lo! We subdued the hills to sing the praises with him at nightfall and sunrise.” Al-Ṭabarī adds, “It has also been mentioned to us that David would stay up at night and fast half of the time. And according to what has been mentioned, four thousand men guarded him every day and night.” Just as Abraham (q.v.) was put to the test with the sacrifice (q.v.) of his son and Jacob (q.v.) was tested with his grief over his son Joseph (q.v.), David wanted to be tested. But he did not withstand the temptation when confronted with the seductive beauty of Bathsheba, who was married to Uri in the Qur’ān there. Bathsheba story, al-Ṭabarī includes a section on Saul, David and Solomon in his Ta’rikh, i.e., his history of the world. In this work, he explains David’s connection with the Psalms thus:

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was married to Uriah (Abriya). Although in the Qur'an there is no mention of the Bathsheba story, al-Tabari quotes q. 38:24 when speaking about David's repentance for marrying Bathsheba and getting rid of her husband Uriah: "He fell down prostrate (see BOWING AND PROSTRATION) and he repented." All these items of course refer to David as the singer of psalms in praise of God as well as of penitential ones. (See also Hassan, David; according to other Muslim traditions Bathsheba was only engaged to Uriah, not married to him.)

At an early stage, the book of Psalms was available in Arabic translation, as we have learned from the translations of al-Yaqubī. A fragment of a Christian Arabic translation of the Psalms (containing Ps 78:20-31, 51-61 in Greek majuscule writing from the second/eighth century) was identified in Damascus by B. Violet (Ein zwin sprachiges Psalmsfragment).


Secondary: C. Adang, Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. From Ibn Rabbah to Ibn Hazm, Leiden 1996, 119 f; B. Carra de Vaux, Da'ī′d, in kḥ, i, 927-8; R.Y. Eliezer and L.R. Wickham, Al-Yaqubī's account of the Israelite prophets

Bibliography


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PUNISHMENT STORIES

Psychology see SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE QUR'AN

Puberty see MATURITY; BIOLOGY AS THE CREATION AND STAGES OF LIFE

Punishment see CHASTISEMENT AND PUNISHMENT; REWARD AND PUNISHMENT; PUNISHMENT STORIES; RETALIATION; VENGEANCE

Punishment Stories

The Qur'an contains many stories, overwhelmingly from the Meccan period (see CHRONOLOGY AND THE QUR'AN), which describe God's destruction of unbelieving communities in the generations before Muhammad (see BELIEF AND UNBELIEF). A key feature of these stories, at least in their more developed forms, is the encounter between a messenger (q.v.) and the particular community to which he is sent to preach God's message. The messenger typically encounters opposition and ridicule but finally God intervenes to destroy the unbelievers. It is to be noted that these stories depict a punishment inflicted by God in this world rather than in the afterlife (see CHASTISEMENT AND PUNISHMENT; REWARD AND PUNISHMENT). This article gives a survey of the relevant qur'anic material and also suggests how these stories illuminate the context in which Muhammad was preaching (see OCCASIONS OF REVELATION).

Early Meccan period

From this period there are a number of passages which are so brief that they can scarcely be described as punishment stories, but which nevertheless point ahead to the more developed narratives (q.v.) to be considered below (see FORM AND STRUCTURE OF THE QUR'AN). These early Meccan passages give short, allusive accounts of the destruction by God of unbelieving communities of the past, along with occasional references to messengers sent by God. The relevant passages, in chronological order, are: 105; 91:11-5; 85:17-20; 73:15-6; 79:15-26; 89:6-14; 53:50-4; 69:4-12; 51:24-46. (See for an analysis of these passages Marshall, God, 39-52.)

Middle and late Meccan periods

Many of the typical features of the punishment stories from these periods are present in the following account of the preaching of the messenger Shu'ayb (q.v.) to the "men of the thicket" (see PEOPLE OF THE THICKET), their rejection of his message and their consequent punishment by God.

The men of the thicket cried lies to the envoys when Shu'ayb said to them: "Will you not be godfearing? I am for you a faithful messenger, so fear God and obey me (see FEAR; OBEDIENCE). I ask of you no wage for this; my wage falls only upon the lord (q.v.) of all being. Fill up the measure, and be not cheater straight balance, a goods of the peopl weights and mea justice and injus chief in the earth, (q.v). Fear him wh creation), and th the ancients." The one of those that: INSANITY; you are like us; indeed, we of the liars (see LI us lumps from her the truthful." He: very well what you cried him lies; the punishment of th edly it was the pu day. Surely in that them are not beli is the all-mighty, t (q.26:176-91).

This is the last of gether form a lon situing virtually these seven, the fi on the messenger Salih (q.v.), Lot (c many similarities and are linked by phrases. These five stori ment of the unbec ticular people to typically one of t each story is the the unbelievers' t the messengers' emphatically into of unbelief as th The opening is fi the messenger's j people to be god edge his own aut