Where Do Psalms Come From?
How Did We get the Book of Psalms?

As you read through the Bible, you will find poetic songs of story-telling, praise or lament in a range of settings from the Exodus onwards.

As we saw earlier in the module, Exodus 15:1-18 presents Moses and the Israelites singing to the Lord about the destruction of the Egyptian army as they follow the Israelites through the sea; and in vss. 20-21 Moses' sister Miriam and the other women singing some of Moses' words and dancing in jubilation. The song and Miriam's "chorus" are an outbreak of praise to God as they re-tell the story of the Egyptian defeat at God's hand.

Numbers 21:17-18 presents a song about the Israelites finding water at a well (called "Beer" – a Hebrew word for "well"). Numbers 21:27-30 presents a song in which ballad- singers sing about destroyed Amorite and Moabite towns and countryside. When I read these verses, they sound like

1. a story being told in poetry rather than narrative
2. some of the psalms I've read
3. the sort of things I read in the prophets.

Judges 5 is similar to Exodus 15; it uses song to re-tell the story of the Israelites defeating an enemy and to offer praise to God.

In 2 Samuel 22, David praises God in song for rescuing him from his enemies.

The point is simple; people sing in jubilation and praise when they are glad, when they are relieved, when they have been rescued – whether it is from drought, war or disaster. It is a very human thing to do and we can't put a limit on when or where the Israelites did it – though it intrigues me that it seems to begin with the Exodus.

In a very different tone, David in 2 Samuel 1:17-27 sings a poetic lament on the death of King Saul and his son Jonathan – the normal thing to do at death. Note the reference to a song written in a book for people to learn.

And in a different mood again, Hannah is portrayed offering a poetic prayer to God as she gives her son Samuel into God's service.

Read the passages above, and you will see how closely these songs resemble some of the psalms. Here are some examples from the book of Psalms:

Re-telling Israelite history:	89, 114, 135, 136 (cf. 2 Chronicles 5:11-14, 7:3, 20:21)
Praising God:	92, 93. 95 – 100
Lamentation:	51, 102
Prayer:	54, 67, 86, 141

The point is that psalms arise naturally and spiritually from the circumstances of God's people. The book of Psalms collects, shapes and provides words to be used in a variety of situations and circumstances.

Psalms in the Ancient World

Israel was not the only culture to write or, presumably, sing psalms. They were used in Syria (by the Canaanites) in Egypt and in Babylon. Israelite psalms share a number of features with these other cultures and especially with the Canaanites.

The best collection of Canaanite psalms comes from the Syrian coastal town of Ugarit. These texts are likely to be older than the biblical writings, probably from around 1400 – 1200BC. There are a number of similarities between the Canaanite and Israelite psalms, and the relative dating makes it likely that the Israelites borrowed from the Canaanites.
The Israelite psalms also have their own distinctive features.

The reading on Moodle from Alter, R. (2007) *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*, (New York: W.W. Norton) deal with this and a number of other issues very helpfully.

What do Canaanite and Israelite psalms share in common?
First, they share a common way of writing poetry, it was part of the shared culture of the ancient world to which Israel belonged and it should not surprise us.

Second, they share elements of the same mythology about the world and its creation, the gods and where they live. For example;

1. in many ancient near eastern religions their god struggling with chaos / the sea (often represented as a giant monster) to create the land. The chaos-creature goes under different names – Tiamat, Leviathan, Rahab – which appear in the Old Testament.
2. The Canaanite god Baal is often represented as a warriors. This seems to be the origin of the metaphor of Yahweh as a warrior.
3. The "council of the gods" and the "sons of god" who attend them are Canaanite ideas.
4. The home of the gods on a northern mountain, Mt Zaphon is found in Canaanite and Israelite psalms.

Third, the Israelites seem to have borrowed from Canaanite texts; for example:

Ugaritic	*Psalm 92:9*
Look, your enemies, O Baal look, your enemies you will smash look, you will destroy your foes.	For your enemies, O Lord, For your enemies shall perish all evildoers will be scattered.

What is distinctive about the Israelite psalms?

Regardless of how much shared or borrowed, Israelite psalms were thoroughly "Yahweh- ised" and pagan elements thoroughly revised out.

1. Any chaos-monsters are transformed into Yahweh's creations and pets and there is no annual battle for the mastery over creation.
2. Yahweh fighting for his people is a reassuring motif in the Hebrew Bible – it is about faithful confidence in Yahweh against whom no-one can stand.
3. A mountain home for the gods transfers to Mt Zion in Jerusalem and its temple. But there is an on-going debate in the about whether God or his name actually live there!
4. Biblical monotheism (believing there is only one God) probably emerged from monolatory (worship of one god, probably as chief god) and that may have emerged from polytheism (belief in and worship of many gods). The Bible traces the emergence of a distinctive honouring of Yahweh through Abram setting up his own altars at Canaanite worship-sites, to Isaiah and Daniel's declarations that Yahweh is the only God and he calls not only Israel but all people to acknowledge him.

The Book of Psalms

The book of Psalms is collection of collections of psalms (and, no, that's not a misprint!). Within the book of Psalms there are five "books" within the book – five collections of psalms that have been brought together in one book, but whose structures have been preserved.

The five books are:

1-41	42-72	73-89	90-106	107-150

Each "book" ends with a doxology, and the final "book", ends with doxological psalm to bring the collection to a close.

Ps 41:13

> "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen."

Ps 72:18-20

> "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does marvellous things.
> Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth.
> Amen and Amen.
> The prayers of David, son of Jesse are ended."

Ps 89:52

> "Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen and Amen."

Ps 106:48

> "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to
> everlasting. And let all the people say "Amen."
> Praise the Lord!"

Ps 150:1-6

> "Praise the Lord!
> Praise God in his sanctuary:
> praise him in his mighty firmament!
> Praise him for his mighty deeds;
> praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
> Praise him with trumpet sound:
> praise him with lute and harp!
> Praise him with tambourine and
> dance; praise him with strings and
> pipe!
> Praise him with clanging cymbals;
> praise him with loud clashing
> cymbals!
> Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
> Praise the Lord!"

Note the conclusion to Ps 72, that "the prayers of David are ended". In fact, there are ten others psalms ascribed to David later in the Psalter.

Headings or Superscriptions

Many psalms have an introductory heading or introduction which might give

- a name – perhaps of an author or the style of psalm associated with them
- a situation which gave raise to the psalm, or for which it might be appropriate
- a technical name for the type of psalm
- a musical direction or
- an indication of when the psalm was to be used.

How historically accurate the names and situations are, is open to question. But the names do not necessarily imply authorship. The Hebrew prefix to the name (*le*) doesn't just mean "by", it can mean "for", "in the style of", "appropriate to" and may indicate that a psalm has been written in a style associated with the name or even in honour or memory of that person.

Most psalms in the first half of the book (1-89) have a name such as David, Asaph or "the sons of Korah", etc. but in the second half (90-150) they are mainly anonymous. Some have musical directions, but many do not.

David	seventy-three psalms in all, of which fourteen are connected with an incident in David's life, cf. esp., Ps. 18;
Solomon	Pss. 72, 127;
Sons of Korah	Pss. 42 - 49, 84, 85, 87, 88;
Asaph	Pss. 50, 73 - 83;
Heman the Ezrahite	Ps. 88;
Ethan the Ezrahite	Ps. 89;
Jeduthun	Pss. 39, 62, 77;
Moses	Ps. 90

Many scholars believe that these details were added late in the process of collection by collectors, editors or liturgists.

Evidence of editorial activity is found in the way some of the psalms are divided and numbered ...

… although there are 150 psalms in Hebrew Massoretic Text (MT) and the early Greek translation called the Septuagint (LXX), their numbering differs.

Hebrew Massoretic Text	Pss. 9 & 10, 42 & 43 are recorded as separate psalms Greek
Septuagint Text	Pss. 9 & 10 and Pss. 114 & 115 recorded as single psalms Pss. 116 & 147 split into two psalms

... and in the way doublets appear in the book …

Ps 14	=	Ps 53
Ps 40:13-17	=	Ps 70:1-5
Ps 108	=	Ps 57:7-11 + 60:5-12

... and in the way possibly independent hymns have been combined into one psalm ...

Pss. 19, 27