

THE JPS BIBLE COMMENTARY

PSALMS תהילים



JEWISH
PUBLICATION
SOCIETY

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Commentaries

The JPS Bible Commentary

PSALMS, IN FIVE VOLUMES

The traditional Hebrew text and New JPS translation with verse-by-verse commentary and a comprehensive General Introduction. The first comprehensive commentary in English on Psalms, integrating the wisdom of traditional rabbinic commentary with modern biblical scholarship.

SCHOLARS

Commentary by an international team of preeminent Bible scholars:

Adele Berlin, University of Maryland (Psalms 121–150)

Marc Brettler, Brandeis University (Psalms 91–120)

Alan Cooper, Jewish Theological Seminary (Psalms 31–60)

Benjamin D. Sommer, Jewish Theological Seminary (Psalms 1–30)

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Special commentary on Psalms in ritual and liturgy provided by:

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PUBLICATION SCHEDULE

Volume 1, with commentary by Benjamin Sommer: Fall 2017

Volume 2, with commentary by Yair Zakovitch: Fall 2018

Volume 2, with commentary by Adele Berlin: Fall 2019

Volume 4, with commentary by Marc Brettler: Fall 2020

Volume 5, with commentary by Alan Cooper: Fall 2021

Overview

Perhaps no part of Jewish literature is more familiar or more beloved to Jews than the Book of Psalms. The Psalms are an important part of the Bible; they have a prominent place in Jewish prayer and are oft-quoted in midrash, poetry, philosophy, and mysticism. The recitation of Psalms is thought to possess special healing properties and is welcomed at times of joy and sadness in the Jewish life cycle. The JPS Commentary editor in chief Prof. Benjamin Sommer notes, however, that, “Perhaps no part of the Jewish heritage is more user-friendly but less familiar to contemporary Jews than the Book of Psalms.” The Book of Psalms is rarely studied outside the academy, but it is striking to note that even within the academy no comprehensive scholarly Jewish commentary exists in English. *The JPS Bible Commentary–Psalms* will fill this void for Jewish scholars, rabbis, teachers, and the learning public.

This new five-volume collection in the celebrated JPS Bible Commentary Series will make the complexity, meanings, settings, and importance of the 150 Psalms accessible to all students of Judaism. As the first Jewish commentary on Psalms in English to incorporate the insights of modern critical scholarship, the series will earn academic respect. At the same time, the elegant format and clear language so characteristic of the JPS commentaries will attract a wide range of readers. *The JPS Bible Commentary–Psalms* is sure to take its place as a classic work on this beloved book of the Bible.

The greatness of the Psalms is that they can be read as literature, prayer, and theology. The Commentary team of scholars bring their own individual approaches to these biblical verses. Each scholar writes on roughly a fifth of the Psalms using his or her particular method of analysis. The variety of methodologies will be outlined in the general introduction (volume 1 only). Readers will be given references to observe how similar Psalms can be understood from multiple perspectives.

Professor Sommer relates a story that is told about Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish theologian, who once delivered a lecture to a synagogue: “After the lecture, an audience member came over to him and said, ‘Last week I went to my neighbor’s church, and I thought their psalms were so beautiful. Why doesn’t Judaism have a book like that?’” *The JPS Bible Commentary–Psalms* will insure that such a question will not arise again (!) and it will offer an unprecedented opportunity to study and reflect on these timeless verses of scripture.

Psalm 24

24 Of David. A psalm.

The earth is the LORD's and all that it holds,
the world and its inhabitants.

²For He founded it upon the ocean,
set it on the nether-streams.

³Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD?
Who may stand in His holy place?—

⁴He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who has not taken a false oath by My^a life
or sworn deceitfully.

⁵He shall carry away a blessing from the LORD,
a just reward from God, his deliverer.

⁶Such is the circle^b of those who turn to Him,
Jacob, who seek Your presence. *Selah.*

⁷O gates, lift up your heads!
Up high, you everlasting doors,
so the King of glory may come in!

⁸Who is the King of glory?—
the LORD, mighty and valiant,
the LORD, valiant in battle.

⁹O gates, lift up your heads!
Lift them up, you everlasting doors,
so the King of glory may come in!

¹⁰Who is the King of glory?—
the LORD of hosts,
He is the King of glory! *Selah.*

כד לדוד מזמור

לַיהוָה הָאָרֶץ וּמְלוֹאֶתָּהּ
תִּבְלֵל וַיֹּשְׁבֵי בָּהּ׃
²כִּי־הוּא עַל־יַמִּים יָסְדָּהּ
וְעַל־נְהַרֹת יִכּוֹנְנָהּ׃

³מִי־יַעֲלֶה בְּהַר־יְהוָה
וּמִי־יִקְוֶים בְּמִקְוֹם קִדְשׁוֹ׃
⁴נְקִי כַפַּיִם וְבַר־לֵבָב
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־נִשְׁוָא לְשׁוּא נַפְשִׁי
וְלֹא נִשְׁבַּע לְמַרְמָה׃
⁵יֵשֵׁא בְרָכָה מֵאֵת יְהוָה
וְיִצְדָּקָה מֵאֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁעוֹ׃
⁶זֶה דֹר דְּרָשׁוּ וְדִרְשׁוּ
מִבְּקֵשֵׁי פָנֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב סֵלָה׃

⁷שָׁאוּ שַׁעְרֵיכֶם וְרָאשֵׁיכֶם
וְהִנָּשְׂאוּ פִתְחֵי עוֹלָם
וַיָּבֹא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד׃
⁸מִי זֶה מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד
יְהוָה עֲזֹז וְגִבּוֹר
יְהוָה גִּבּוֹר מִלְחָמָה׃
⁹שָׁאוּ שַׁעְרֵיכֶם וְרָאשֵׁיכֶם
וְהִנָּשְׂאוּ פִתְחֵי עוֹלָם
וַיָּבֹא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד׃
¹⁰מִי הוּא זֶה מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד
יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
הוּא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד סֵלָה׃

Commentary (*sample*)

VERSE 1.

The earth . . . the world. According to Radak, the term *eretz* (translated here as **the earth**) means “all the world,” while its parallel in the second verse, *tevel* (**world**), means the inhabited world or dry land. Nahum Sarna confirms Radak’s reading on the basis of the Akkadian phrase *eli tabali*, which means “by land” (as opposed to *eli nari*, “by water”).¹ It follows that **all it holds** (*umelo’ah*) means “everything in the world,” while the parallel of that phrase in the second verset, **its inhabitants** (*yoshevei vah*), refers specifically to land creatures or perhaps to humans. This verse, then, is a single poetic line that displays parallelism of specification as it moves from the whole world to the dry land. It may also display heightening parallelism as it moves from all created things to the highest earthly creature. As is typical in biblical poetry, the first verset uses a common word while the second uses a fancier, more literary one: *eretz* appears 2,504 times in the Bible; *tevel* appears just 36 times (all of them in poetry).² On these tendencies in biblical parallelism, see the introduction in volume 1, “Poetry of the Psalms.”

All its inhabitants. *Yoshevei vah*. Grammatically, this is a somewhat strange or redundant construct, since the construct noun *yoshevei* is followed not by another noun but by a preposition with a pronomial suffix. This sort of construction represents an elegant form of language and appears occasionally in biblical Hebrew poetry, but never in prose; see, e.g., Isa 9:1–2 and Psalm 2:12.

VERSE 2.

The verse alludes to what for ancient Israelites was the well-known story of God’s combat against the Sea or Yam, which concluded with God creating the world as we know it on top of the sea’s corpse.³ See the Introduction in volume 1, “Creation and Combat in the Book of Psalms.” In Canaanite literature, it was the god Baal who defeated the Sea; in Babylonian myth, it was Marduk who, having defeated the forces of chaos led by the deity of salt water, founded the world on top of the primeval waters. This psalm is careful to insist that YHWH, not any other deity, rules supreme.

Interpretation of Psalm 24 (*excerpt*)

In the introduction, we noted that this psalm has three parts. The first deals with creation, focusing on God's actions. The second discusses moral behavior, highlighting humanity's actions. The third directs attention to the relationship between God and humanity: humans acknowledge God as king as God enters the temple. This third section displays the basic theme of divine enthronement or coronation psalms (such as Psalms 93 and 96). One could characterize the three sections, then, as follows:

Verses 1–2:	Creation	Subject: God
Verses 3–6:	Moral behavior	Subject: Humanity
Verses 7–10:	Coronation	Subject: Humanity and God

At the beginning of the psalm (and of the world), God is creator, and at the end God is king. The crucial question of the psalm is: how does God move from creator to king? God can be creator even when alone, but to be king, God must have subjects who obey and acclaim Him.¹ As several kabbalistic works state, “There is no king without a kingdom.”² The middle section of the psalm provides the link between God as creator and as king: God becomes king when humans become worthy to be His subjects. Human behavior moves God from one status to the next.

We saw in the commentary to verse 2 that verb **set it** could be understood as either a past tense or a description of an ongoing action; God either made the world steady above the flux of the primordial ocean in the past, or God continues to fix the world on over the forces of disorder into the present. In light of the middle section of the psalm, it becomes evident that the second reading is preferable. God constantly becomes king as chaos is defeated³—and humanity has a role in this process. Through honest action, admirable thought, and sincere speech, humans diminish primordial chaos. Through the opposite, people add to it, making creation itself less firm and detracting from God's status as king.⁴ In light of the psalm's movement from part one to part three, the psalm proves to be at once a song of the temple, a coronation psalm and a wisdom composition. It shows that human behavior generates the environment in which God can become king with an earthly home.

Dedication Opportunities

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The Jewish Publication Society
Philadelphia pa 19103-1399
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