The book of Psalms is a rich and varied collection of prayers, praises, and meditations. The Psalms are a treasured part of the Church’s corporate worship, but individuals love to pore over the Psalms as well, at times offering them up to God as their own. What accounts for the timeless appeal of these compositions from ancient Israel? In part, the answer lies in the fact that the psalms are a different kind of literature from the rest of the Bible. Instead of the history of Israelite kings, or divine messages delivered by the prophets, the psalms contain the direct human response to God. The psalms reflect all human conditions and emotions. In the psalms we hear cries of anguish and despair at sickness, joyous praise of God, happy thanksgiving for divine blessings, and quiet reflection on the workings of God in the world. How are they “the Word of God” as part of the Bible? The psalms contain affirmations of God as gracious and merciful, as righteous judge, and as creator of a good creation. God punishes
sin: yet in the words of the twenty-third psalm, "the Lord is (our) Shepherd."

The traditional view of the Book of Psalms is that King David wrote them as his own personal, private poetry. Seventy-three of the psalms contain the Hebrew "le-David" in their superscription. The Hebrew preposition "le" can mean "to," "about," or "by," but the traditional view held that "le-David" meant written by David. Davidic authorship was also supported by the fact that David offers two psalm-like compositions in the book of 2 Samuel. 2 Sam 1:19-27 is David's lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, and 2 Sam 22:2-51 is a psalm of thanksgiving offered by David after his victory over the Philistines. The tradition of Davidic authorship increased over time. A copy of a psalms scroll, dating from the first century A.D. and found in the collection of ancient manuscripts known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, attributes 3,600 psalms to David, far more than the current 150 now found in our Bible! The authors of the New Testament also assumed Davidic Authorship of the psalms.
Modern scholarship has challenged this view. The German biblical scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) categorized the psalms into five different types (in German, Gattungen): festive hymns, communal complaints, individual complaints, royal psalms, and thanksgiving songs. Two other minor categories are enthronement hymns, which celebrate God as king, and wisdom psalms. Gunkel sought to reconstruct a plausible life setting (in German, Sitz-im-Leben) for the psalms in ancient Israelite society. On the basis of these different types, he conjectured that the majority of psalms were originally written for use in the Temple or some other corporate worship setting. Gunkel’s form-critical analysis of the psalms is now widely accepted.

Another feature of modern biblical scholarship that has deepened our understanding of psalms is the study of Hebrew poetry. All the psalms are written in poetic form characterized by a two-part, or occasionally a three-part, line. The second half of the verse relates to the first in one of a number of ways. It may contrast,
extend or amplify the meaning of the first half of the verse. A line of Hebrew poetry normally is balanced, so that some elements of the first half correspond to the second half. For example, the first line of Psalm 95, better known as the Venite, reads: “O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” The first half of the verse is a call to the faithful to praise God; the second half further specifies that the song should be a joyful noise and that the Lord is the stable Rock who saves. The meaning of the first clause is thus extended and underscored in the second.

The book of Psalms is divided into five smaller “books” (Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150) that are thought to correspond in some way to the five books of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible.) Yet no one has been able to discern a precise logic to their organization. There are also sub-collections within the larger five-fold structure. Psalms 42-83 are often called the “Elohistic Psalter” because of their frequent use of the term “Elohim” for God. They may
have been composed in the Northern Kingdom of Israel where the use of the term "Elohim" was more common than in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Fifteen psalms (Psalms 120-134) are referred to in their superscription as "Psalms of Ascent" and are thought to have been used by pilgrims as they "ascended" or walked up to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the three principle feasts: Passover, the Feast of Booths, or the Feast of Weeks.

Like Judaism, the Church has also long used the Psalms in its worship. Psalms have been a central part of monastic worship at least since the fourth century in both the Eastern and Western expressions of Christianity. In the Anglican Communion, the psalms in the Daily Office have come to be offered not only by professional clergy and monks, but by lay people as well. Prayed by the faithful for thousands of years, the psalms continue to serve as paradigms of prayer, ready-made formulations steeped in the human experience of the ages. Nothing can substitute for reading and praying the
psalms on one’s own, but the following commentary on six psalms can help the novice begin to explore its riches.

Psalm 1

Psalm 1 is classified as a wisdom psalm. It is not a prayer offered directly to God, but rather as a reflection on the ways of God in the world. Biblical wisdom literature (like the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) frequently make strong contrasts between the behavior of the righteous and the wicked. We see the same movement here. The psalm is neatly divided into two parts. Verses 1-3 describe the way of the righteous, verses 4-5 describe the wicked, and the concluding verse 6 contrasts their fates. The righteous will of course fare better with the Lord. The righteous are they whose “delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law they meditate day and night.” “Law” is better translated as “instruction” here or simply left in the original Hebrew “torah.” The idea conveyed is that studying the written word of God is an act of virtue, a way of more clearly discerning the will of
God. The placement of this psalm at the beginning of the book of Psalms suggests that the editor of the collection conceived the book of Psalms itself as "torah" or instruction, and not only a book of prayers to be used in worship. For that reason, Psalm 1 is probably a late, exilic or post-exilic psalm which was written after the scriptures became a collection of holy writings meant to be studied as well as heard.

Psalm 8

Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise to God. The theme is the marvelous work of God in creation. The first and last verses of the psalm form an inclusio, or brackets, around the body of the Psalm. The psalmist exclaims, "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" The Lord’s name is YHWH, the personal name that God revealed to the Israelites. Knowing someone’s name in ancient Israel gave one special knowledge and insight into that individual’s character. The ancient Israelites were allowed to know the personal name of God, and were thus given
insight into Yahweh's works. The personal name of God is thought to have so much inherent power by observant Jews that they do not pronounce it aloud.

The work extolled is God's ordering of all creation with humans at the penultimate position. The psalm uses words that call to mind the theme of *imago dei* found in Genesis 1:26-27. Upon observing the magnitude of the moon and the stars in the heavens, in verses 4-5, the psalmist wonders, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care of them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." Like God, who is the one true sovereign over all creation, so too, humans have their role as royal custodians over the created order on earth. The psalmist is awed at the responsible role that humanity is given and his impulse is to sing this hymn of praise.

**Psalm 22**

In form, Psalm 22 is primarily a lament. There are more laments in the Psalter than
any other psalm type. But this should come as no surprise. Humans are continually complaining: to ourselves, to one another, and to God! The proliferation of laments in the book of Psalms reflects the legitimate human response to life’s pain and difficulty. Christians do live in hope for the future, but the human vicissitudes of life nonetheless have their claims on us.

The superscription of Psalm 22 attributes the psalm to King David. The Psalm is significant to Christians because its images shaped the gospel accounts of Christ’s Passion. The psalmist cries that “for my clothing they cast lots” (v.18). The first verse contains words attributed to Jesus on the cross according to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The psalm continues by describing the physical and emotional torments the psalmist is suffering and his debased state: “My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones.” He is cast as a “suffering servant,” tormented and humiliated by his enemies.

In the middle of the psalm, the tone
changes. Instead of expressing torment, the psalmist affirms that he has been delivered. He tells the account of his deliverance: "For [God] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him" (v.24). The last part of the psalm is an affirmation of trust in God's deliverance and of the consequent responsibility of the psalmist to give witness to that miracle. Given the change of tone from one of deep distress to one of relief and trust, it is hard to know what to make of the Gospel writers use of Psalm 22:1 as the last words of Jesus. Was Jesus expressing his despair at feeling abandoned or, in fact, affirming his deep faith reflected in the end of Psalm 22, that his Father would certainly save him after all?

**Psalm 51**

Psalm 51 is a lament. Together with Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143, it is one of the seven penitential psalms, in liturgical use from early Christian times. In the later Middle Ages, Western
Christians recited the penitential psalms after Lauds on Fridays in Lent. They also have a special place in the Ash Wednesday liturgy. The superscription of the psalm suggests that the setting was David's psalm of penitence after the prophet Nathan had accused him of murderous treachery in the killing of Uriah the Hittite, after David's adulterous affair with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. Certainly the Psalm contains an urgent appeal to God for forgiveness. Psalm 51 begins not with an ornate invocation, but with the immediate petition: "Have mercy on me, O God according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." Understanding the psalm in its traditional sense in the context of David's life can enhance our appreciation of this psalm. If God could forgive the penitent Kind David, who broke two of the Ten Commandments, surely God can forgive those whose sins are less grievous.

Church tradition certainly held a high view of this psalm. Two of its verses are familiar to Episcopalians because of their
use in the Book of Common Prayer. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (v.10), is contained in Set A of the Suffrages for the Daily Office. The use of "create" is significant. In the Hebrew Bible, the verb create (bara') is found primarily in the first creation story (Genesis 1:1-2:4) and in Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-54). God is always the subject of the verb "create." Only God has the power to fashion a new, pure heart for the penitent psalmist and for us as well. Verse 15 is also familiar: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." This verse, divided into the officiant's call and the people's response, appears at the Invitatory to the Psalm in the service of Morning Prayer.

Psalm 132

Psalm 132 is a royal psalm that celebrated God's choice of King David and his house for perpetual kingship, and God's choice of Jerusalem as the site of the sanctuary. Psalm 132 is one of the psalms listed as a "Psalm of Ascents" in the superscription. It may have been sung
by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate a festival, perhaps at the coronation ceremony of a Davidic king of Jerusalem. Verse 8 recalls David’s relocation of the sacred ark of the Lord to Jerusalem which is described in 2 Samuel 6: “Rise up, O Lord, and go to our resting place, you and the ark of your might.” The psalm suggests involvement on the part of the priests and people: “Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your faithful shout for joy” (v.9).

The psalm refers to the Davidic covenant, which is described in 2 Samuel 7. God makes a twofold promise to David. The promise plays on the dual meaning of “house” in Hebrew. God promises David that his “house,” that is, his descendants, will remain on the throne in Jerusalem forever. The promise of the covenant, as described in the psalm, is contingent on the righteous behavior of the descendants of David: “If your sons keep my covenant and my decrees that I shall teach them, their sons also, forevermore, shall sit on your throne” (v.12). In 2 Samuel 7, God also promises that David’s
son will build a “house” for God, that is, a temple. The psalm extends the election of the Temple site to designate the whole city of Jerusalem as holy: “For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation” (v.13). The end of the psalm reiterates the promise to David. Phrased as an oracle of God, it states: “There I will cause a horn to sprout up for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one.” These words were a wellspring of hope for generations, particularly the first Christians who saw them fulfilled in the advent of the anointed one, Jesus Christ.

Psalm 150

The final psalm in the Bible is a short, sweet psalm of praise. The first word is the command in Hebrew, “Hallelujah,” which means “Praise the Lord!” In its universal call to praise, the psalm manifests the unmitigated joy of all creation. Offering praise to the Lord may rightly involve musical instrument: trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, and even dance. The conclusion to the Psalm, indeed, to the entire book of praises, is the call “Let
everything that breathes praise the Lord!" The final word of the psalm, and a fitting way to end this essay on the collection of the psalms which are a response to God's work on behalf of Israel, is "Hallelujah!"

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