

A Basic Introduction for Studying the Psalms

BASICS FOR STUDYING PSALMS (AND OTHER HEBREW POETICAL WRITINGS)

The Psalms— 1 of 5 books considered Poetical in our Bibles (in OT)— is a collection of 150 different Psalms. Each Psalm is a separate or *stand alone* unit, although there are groupings of Psalms within the Book as a whole. They are *not* chapters within the Book of Psalms, but individual writings.

There are various Types of Psalms based on their content or theme. The largest category within the Psalms are those called *Laments*. These are very structured petitions or cries for God's help. Other common types include— Praise, Historical, Wisdom, Nature, Messianic, and the often misunderstood Imprecatory or "Curse" Psalms.

The Psalms are devotional in nature. They are typically a combination of hymn (song) and prayer. Because they are devotional hymn—prayers they usually have emotional and figurative language in them. Many tend to be quite personal (especially King David's) and are expressions of the spirit and soul of the writer to God.

There are 2 very important elements to look for when studying Psalms (Poetical Books). As mentioned already, *figurative language* is the first important element. Figures of speech and wording (expressions) that need to be handled carefully and thoughtfully. Also, what is called *Hebrew Parallelism*, which is a repetition of thought done for emphasis and clarification. There are three primary kinds of Hebrew Parallelism—*synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic*.

Figurative Language is common in all languages including English. It is simply language or wording which paint a picture, so it is sometimes called *picture language*. Its purpose is simple— to make the unfamiliar understood by linking it with something which is familiar to us.

This helps make the unknown known, the abstract and conceptual more concrete. It can be misunderstood when taken literally, which happens when people try to take all words in the Bible in their most literal sense. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:29), Jesus tells us to "pluck our eye out" if it offends us. Taking this literally could be very painful and unhelpful, and it's not what the Lord intends!

Repetition of thought helps make truth more memorable and clear. Just repeating something word for word can be monotonous and uninteresting, but repetition with creativity and variation captures interest and promotes understanding.

The 3 kinds of Hebrew Parallelism are fairly simple to see and grasp within poetic writing. *Synonymous* parallelism is the repetition of a thought in similar wording. *Antithetic* parallelism contrasts thoughts for distinction, emphasis, and clarity. *Synthetic* parallelism is where a thought is extended or added to for emphasis and clarity.

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PSALMS — Background

The name comes from the Greek word— *psalmoi* = “poems with music”. In the Septuagint (Greek OT) it is — Psalterium (Psalter), “collections of songs.” In the Hebrew Bible it’s the 1st book in the 3rd division of Scriptures (Law, Prophets, and Writings). In our English Bible, it’s the 2nd group of books in the 3rd division of the OT Scriptures (Pentateuch, History, Wisdom/Poetical, and the Major and Minor Prophets).

Because it is a collection, there are several authors (some unknown), but Psalms are often referred to as the “Psalms of David”. King David wrote 75— 73 designated to him in Psalms and Pss 2 and 95 referenced (in the NT) as his.

Author others include Solomon (2), the sons of Korah (12), Asaph (12), Heman (1), Ethan (1) and Moses (1). There are 34 psalms which have no title or note identifying them. They were possibly collected or written by Ezra (or Hezekiah).

Since there are many writers the time line of their being written covers several centuries. Moses c. 1410 BC up through the time of Ezra/ Nehemiah c. 430 BC. Most were written during the years of the Monarchy (90 or more) about the 10th Century BC) But many (50+/-) were written during the post-exilic period, c. 8th — 5th Century BC.

The 150 Psalms are collected into 5 Books or sections which were collected together over several centuries in different groups at different times. Some of these collections were done by David and Solomon, Hezekiah and Ezra. The collection was completed by the 3rd Century BC for the Septuagint (Grk OT) translation.

The Book of Psalms is structured this way. Each book has a conclusion or doxology, but the book as a whole has an Introduction— Pss 1 and 2, and a Conclusion— Pss 146-150. The 5 Books with their closings are— Book 1— Pss 1-41, its closing is 41:13.; Book 2— Pss 42-72, its closing is 72:18-19; Book 3— Psalms 73-89, its closing is 89:52; Book 4— Pss 90-106, its closing is 106:48; Book 5— Psalms 107-150, its closing is 150:1-6

The Psalms are devotional in nature whose core (*heart*) is the fruit of reflection and meditation on the Law and History. They are an expression of the *soul and emotions* of an Old Covenant relationship between God and man. These were *songs of the heart* to YHWH = the “Covenant God of Israel,” as “Ruler, Judge, and Faithful One to His Chosen”.

The Psalms reflect their own time and culture within their general time frame. Book 1 contains David’s psalms of personal praise and trust, and blessing (praising) the Lord. Book 2 focuses more on the Monarchy and trust as God’s chosen. Book 3 focuses on turmoil and the time of Exile—*Why are they suffering?*—with a claim of righteousness. Book 4 focuses on the Post-exilic time (*after* the 70-year exile) and praise for God’s mercy and forgiveness. Book 5 is Post-exilic expressing trust in God in simple, daily ways.

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TYPES OF PSALMS— CLASSIFICATIONS AND STYLES

[these usually overlap— that is, they're not just one or the other]

There are several Types of Psalms which are somewhat artificial groupings which often overlap or are mixed within a psalm. Most psalms are prayers (Laments or petitions) or Praise and Thanksgiving (see following list).

1. **Laments or Petitional (supplications)**— a cry for help, usually with sorrow, complaints (lament) and petitions (supplications— asking for something)— both as an individual (personal need or intercedes for someone else)— **Ex**— Pss 6, 25, 42, 102 and as a community (the nation/Israel)— **Ex**— Pss 77, 86, 123
2. **Praise (or Hallelujah)**— having a theme of praise— express having trust in God— both individual and community (as a nation)— **Ex**— Pss 106, 111–113, 115–117, 135, 146–150
3. **Thanksgiving (testimonial)**— expressing and giving thanks for what God has done— both individual and community (as a nation)— **Ex**— Pss 16 and 18 (*many other Psalms include some praise and thanksgiving*)
4. **Nature**— speak of God's work of creation— inspiration and testimony — **Ex**— Pss 8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 104
5. **Historical**— recalling of events in Israel's history— summary of highlights where God has intervened for Israel to maintain His covenant promise — **Ex**— Pss 78, 105, 106, 136
6. **Wisdom (didactic/instructional)**— these give some instruction about God, his will, man's need, etc.— even as formal instruction — **Ex**— Pss 1, 5, 15, 17, 50, 73, 94, 101
7. **Repentance (penitential)**— confession of sin and acknowledging need for God's help — **Ex**— Pss 6, 51
8. **Curse (imprecatory)**— pronouncing judgements or curses on enemies (of God, themselves or both)— often hard to interpret or accept as godly— **Ex**— Pss 35, 52, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 140
9. **Royal and/or Messianic**— speaking of the king— especially King David and sometimes looking ahead to the Messianic King (prophetic of **Christ**)— **Ex**— Pss 2, 20–24, 41, 68, 118
10. **Pilgrim**— Psalms sung during pilgrimages to Jerusalem/Temple (when attending annual feasts)— probably a hymn book including various "Songs of Zion" and the "Songs of Ascent"— **Ex**— Pss 120–134

Typical Lament Structure—

- an Introduction (cry to God)
- the Lament (specific concern)
- a Confession of trust (in God)
- a Petition (request of God for something)
- a Vow (promise or declaration of praise)

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LITERARY DEVICES FOUND IN THE PSALMS

Various literary devices are used by the authors of poetic writing. Some of the main Figures of Speech used are—

1. **Simile**— comparison of two things, usually employing the words “as” or “like” (Ex– “He will be like a tree,” Psalm 1:3)
2. **Metaphor**— comparison of two things without using the word “as” or “like” (Ex– “The Lord is a sun and shield,” Psalm 84:11)
3. **Hyperbole**— exaggeration for effect, dramatic overstatement (Ex– “Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with tears,” Psalm 6:6)
4. **Personification**— applying personality traits to inanimate objects (Ex– “All my bones will say, Lord, who is like Thee,” Psalm 35:10)
5. **Apostrophe**— addressing inanimate things (Ex– “What ails you, O sea, that you fled?” Psalm 114:5)
6. **Synecdoche**— representing whole by a part or part by a whole (Ex– “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?” Psalm 2:1)

MUSICAL TERMINOLOGY & HEBREW CLASSIFICATIONS IN PSALMS

[found in the title of the Psalm, or within the text– meanings are not certain]

1. **alamoth**— female voices or a stringed instrument (Ps 46)
2. **gittith**— wine press or vintage song [musical instrument from Gath] (Ps 8, 81, 84)
3. **Jeduthun**— a choir leader in King David’s day (Ps 39, 77)
4. **lehazkir**— “to be remembered”, a request
5. **letodah**— for praising, for giving thanks
6. **lelammed**— for teaching
7. **maschil (maskil)**— meditative, or skillful Psalm, or for instruction in godliness— used 13x
8. **michtam (miktam)**— musical or literary term (an inscription), possibly a golden or atonement Psalm— David’s prayer when in great danger (Ps 16)— used 6x
9. **mismor (mizmor)**— a psalm, to pluck an instrument— used 57x
10. **neginoth**— a stringed instrument (Ps 4, 5, 54, 55, 61, 67, 76)
11. **nehiloth**— a wind instrument (Ps 5)
12. **selah**— musical change or interlude, possibly a pause for meditation— used 73x
13. **sheminith**— an eighth or octave, or male voices (Ps 6)
14. **shiggayon (shiggaion)**— music or literary term, wandering or irregular music (Ps 7)
15. **shir**— a song (sacred or secular)— used 29x
16. **shir yedidot**— a “song of loves” or wedding song
17. **tehillah**— praise— used 1x
18. **tephillah**— prayer— used 5x
19. **“to the Chief Musician”**— perhaps a special collection— used 55x