

The Psalms: Introduction & Notes

The book of Psalms was Israel's hymnal. About half of its 150 songs are attributed to David, and about 50 are not attributed to an author. As noted in the Introduction to Section 5, the traditional headings, which include the author, occasion, tune, and other musical directions, are generally considered to be later additions. However, they are quite ancient and widely accepted as reliable. The New Testament attributes some of its quotes from psalms to David.

The earliest psalm, 90, was written by Moses (15th century BC). The latest, like 137, were written during the Babylonian exile (6th century BC). Most were written during David's time (late 11th to early 10th centuries BC). The psalms were probably compiled after Judah returned from exile.

Psalms covers a wide variety of topics. Many are deeply personal, expressing the inner thoughts and feelings of the author. They are filled with praise, as the Hebrew name, *Tehillim* (Praises), indicates. Many are also prayers. For our survey, we've chosen four themes from the psalms: Instruction, Appeal, Praise, and Messianic Prophecy.

Psalms is the most frequently quoted book in the New Testament, with many of those pertaining to Messianic Prophecy. Psalms is followed by Isaiah and Deuteronomy in number of New Testament quotes and allusions.

One category of note is "Songs of Ascents" (120-134). These were sung by Israelites traveling to the temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is elevated above all the surrounding land, so travelers "went up to Jerusalem," regardless of the direction from which they came. The temple was located on a hill. As you read the Songs of Ascents, picture the growing caravans of Israelites on the roads to Jerusalem around feast time singing them as they walked.

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The psalms are poetic and frequently employ figurative language, such as hyperbole, metaphor, and personification. They are structured according to Hebrew parallelism. A few psalms are acrostic in Hebrew. Chiasms are also common. See the Hebrew Poetry handout for more about figures of speech.

Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 instruct Christians to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. While "hymns" and "spiritual songs" are general terms, psalms refers to the inspired collection of 150 songs. Several psalms have been set to music in modern times with minimal adjustments to the lyrics, such as Psalm 19 (The Law of the Lord) and 23 (The Lord Is My Shepherd). Some hymns, like How Shall The Young Secure Their Hearts (Psa. 119:9) and The Rock That Is Higher Than I (Psa. 61:2) are based on lines or themes from the psalms.

A few terms appear in the headings and texts. These are often left untranslated, because their meaning is uncertain. *Selah* is now widely believed to be a pause, similar to our rest. Some translations render it "interlude" (ISV, NLT, EXP). When a word or phrase is preceded by "According to," it probably refers to a tune. For example, the children's Apostles Song could be described as "according to Jesus Loves Me," because it's set to the tune of Jesus Loves Me. Some twenty psalms indicate the tune in the heading, with several reoccurring. *Shiggaion* (Psa. 7:1; Hab. 3:1) could be a form of *higgaion*, translated "meditation," "resounding music," and "whispering" in the NASB. *Shiggaion* could also be derived from *shagah*, meaning to stray or lead astray. Either of these could refer to a musical style or other notation. Various explanations are proposed for *miktam*, with the most common being "golden" (*ketem*), "indelible" or "hidden" (*katam*), or "engraved" (*miktab*). *Maskil* derives from the root verb *sakal*, meaning to be wise. Therefore, it seems to refer to a psalm which imparts wisdom.