

PSALMS

*A Reader's Guide
by Andrew Forrest*

The biblical book of Psalms is a collection of 150 Hebrew poems.

Our English title “Psalms” is from a Greek word that means “songs of praise.”

In Hebrew the book of Psalms was either called “prayers” or “praises”, which is a good summary of its contents.

[Historical note: The Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek a couple of centuries before the time of Jesus, and many Jews around the Mediterranean read the Bible in Greek as Hebrew became a language used only in formal worship—think of the use of Latin in Roman Catholic mass.]

THE EMOTIONS OF THE PSALMS

The Psalms teach us that the appropriate way to handle our emotions is to be honest and pray through them. In the psalms we find language for thanksgiving and joy and faith, but also for terror, and even for hatred! The reason even the language of hatred is in the Psalms is because the Bible is teaching us that it is good for us to scream our hatred out loud *and thereby give it over to God*.

THE PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Psalms are the most-quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. There are too many examples to provide here, other than to point out that Jesus quotes from Psalm 22 on the cross! “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If Jesus used the language of the psalms to shape his language, so should we. [One cool detail reported in the New Testament: on that first Palm Sunday, the crowds shout words from Psalm 118 when Jesus enters Jerusalem: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”]

HISTORICAL AND MUSICAL SUPERSCRPTIONS

Many of the psalms have superscriptions above them that provide information about:

- an author (see Psalm 23, “a David psalm”);
- the historical background behind a particular psalm (see Psalm 3);
- or musical instructions for a psalm’s use in Israelite worship in the Jerusalem Temple (see Psalm 6).

These musical terms provide instruction about tune names, instrumentation, etc. Unfortunately, the actual sense of many of these terms have been lost to us, and when this happens, the translators just print the Hebrew word. (See Psalm 6 and the phrase “According to the Sheminith.”)

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS IN THE PSALMS

Anointed One: The king in Jerusalem was anointed with oil to signify God’s favor and faithfulness to him. Messiah means “anointed one” in Hebrew; in Greek it is Christ. The early Christians saw that many of the psalms weren’t only talking about a king in Jerusalem, but were also foretelling about Jesus.

Courts of the Lord: the courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem.

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Exile: Though this term nowhere appears in the Psalms, the concept is crucial to understanding some of them. In 586 BC, the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem and carried off many of the Israelites into slavery. Some of the psalms are written from the point of view of the exiles. (See Psalm 137.)

Law: The Hebrew word torah is often translated as “law,” but it is very hard to accurately capture its sense in English. It means “teaching” or “instruction” or “guidance” or “law” all wrapped up together. (See Psalm 1.)

King: starting with David, his descendants were the rulers in Jerusalem from 1000-586 BC. Some of the psalms are royal psalms, used in coronation ceremonies. (Psalm 2 is a good example.)

Selah: an obscure musical term. We have no idea what it means.

Song of Ascents: Psalms 120-134 are given this superscription, and they were road trip music the Israelite pilgrims sang as they walked up to Jerusalem for the great festivals of worship.

Zion: Mount Zion is the name of the little mountain in Jerusalem on which the Temple was built by King Solomon. Zion is shorthand for the Temple, for Jerusalem itself, and as a stand-in for God’s covenant people, Israel. (Mount Moriah, where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac—see Genesis 22—is the same place as Zion.)