

# An Introduction to the Book of Psalms

## Part 1: Overview of the book of Psalms

The book of Psalms falls under the category of wisdom literature. Wisdom literature looks to give insight into how "the way the world works, humanity's place within it, and how all this operates under God's creative, sovereign care." (ESV Study Bible)

### I. Origin and Development of the Psalms

- A. The book of Psalms is comprised of 150 individual psalms written throughout the course of a thousand years (~1300bc-400bc).
- B. The majority of the psalms were written pre-exile, but the arrangement of the collection of psalms was made in the post exilic period by an unknown editor.
- C. While there is no apparent order in subject matter or date from the overall structure of the book, there are some important groupings and movements.
  - 1. There are 5 major sections or books within Psalms. (1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150)
  - 2. There is an apparent grouping by authorship (Davidic psalms in books 1 and 2) and a grouping by songs of ascent used by pilgrims to Jerusalem (Psalm 120-134).
  - 3. The overall movement within the Psalms is from lament to praise and from suffering to glory.

### II. The Message of the Psalms

- A. The concept of covenant is very important to understand while reading Psalms.

"The psalmist is speaking to God about God on the basis of being in a covenant relationship with him." (Longman, page 57)

- B. Psalm 1 and 2 introduces and orients the reader to the Psalms.
  - 1. Psalm 1: There are only two types of people - the blessed man who longs for God and his law and the wicked man who does not.
  - 2. Psalm 2: The Lord reigns!
- C. Main themes:
  - 1. ESV Study Bible: Monotheism, creation and fall, election and covenant, covenant membership, and eschatology.
  - 2. Futato: Our God is King. Our destiny is glory. Our King is coming.

### III. The Purpose of the Psalms

A. The purpose of the Psalms is to confess faith and love in God.

"The psalmists cry out to God from the context of their intimate covenant relationship with God and they call on others who know God's love to do the same." (Longman, 62)

1. The use of the Psalms in the Old Testament was for private and public worship.
2. While it is still used this way in the New Testament period, we are able to read the Psalms with a fuller understanding knowing that the Psalms and all Scripture revealed and anticipated Jesus, the coming Davidic King and Messiah.

(Luke 24:25-27, 44)

And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

B. The Psalms are helpful in developing our theology. We learn much about God and about ourselves as we read the psalms.

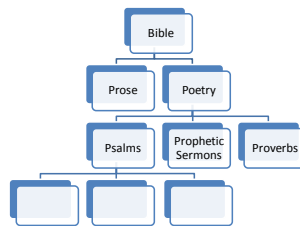
C. Psalms is also a book to instruct God's people on happiness and holiness.

### IV. Genre

A. What is a genre?

1. From a literary viewpoint, a genre is a group of writings that have similar characteristics such as mood, content, structure, or phraseology.

The Bible can be divided into two main categories - prose and poetry. Poetry can be divided into further categories which include the Psalms, and the Psalms can be divided even further.



B. Prose / Poetry

1. Poetry is evocative. It stimulates the reader's imagination and emotions.
2. Prose is the commonplace style of writing that is meant to address the intellect.

C. What are the different genres of psalms?

1. Scholars categorize the various categories of psalms differently, but we can have a general grouping of the psalms into eight categories.

- a. Hymns of praise --> exuberant praise of the Lord
- b. Lament --> opposite extreme of praise
- c. Thanksgiving --> usually a response to an answered lament
- d. Remembrance --> remembering God's past faithfulness
- e. Confidence --> trust in God's goodness, greatness, power
- f. Kingship --> focuses on either earthly king or God as king
- g. Wisdom --> concrete ways God wants his people to live
- h. Imprecatory --> curse upon the enemy

2. A psalm can contain more than one genre (Ps. 45, 78). There should be flexibility as you read each psalm.

## V. Titles of the Psalms

A. There are generally two types of titles - indication of authorship and description of the historical context.

B. Scholars have different views about the titles.

- 1. Some say the titles are canonical but may not be original to that individual psalm. The title was added to the psalm later.
- 2. Some say the titles are non-canonical but should be treated as reliable early tradition. The titles help inform the reading of the psalm but we shouldn't bend the interpretation to fit the title.

C. The context of each psalm without the title gives no specific historical data to tie the psalm to only that historical event. Why does this matter? This gives the reading of the Psalms a feel of **timelessness**. **The psalms are relevant and speak to us in our various contexts throughout history.**

## Part 2: Hebrew Poetry

"Hebrew poetry is a type of literature that communicates with terse lines employing *parallelism* and *imagery* in high frequency." (Futato, 24)

### I. The parts of Hebrew Poetry

A. The line

- 1. A basic unit of Hebrew poetry. *A line is one complete parallelistic expression of thought.*
- 2. Each line can contain 2 or more poetic phrases.
  - a. Each half line is a colon, so the basic and most frequent line is called a bicolon.

(Ps.92:1)

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,  
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;

b. A line can also be a tricolon, tetracolon / quatrain, or a monocola

(Ps. 112:9)

He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor;  
his righteousness endures forever;  
his horn is exalted in honor.

3. A line is not necessarily equivalent to an English sentence.

(Ps 117:1)

Praise the LORD, all nations!  
Extol him, all peoples!

4. Some verses can contain more than one line.

(Ps 47:9)

The princes of the peoples gather  
as the people of the God of Abraham.  
For the shields of the earth belong to God;  
he is highly exalted!

5. The first colon will be on the left margin.

6. The second colon will always be differentiated by one indentation.

7. Tricola will keep with the second colon. A third level of indentation only occurs when there is not enough room in the column to get the entire colon on one line of print.

## B. The Strophe

1. The strophe is a group of related lines in poetry. It is equivalent to a paragraph in prose. Modern translations of Bible indicate the divisions of strophes by adding an extra space in between each strophe. This extra space functions like the indentation of a new paragraph.

2. The primary basis for grouping lines into a strophe is sense.

3. A strophe focuses on a common theme. One idea holds the verses in the strophe together.

### Psalm 13

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

<sup>2</sup>How long must I take counsel in my soul  
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

<sup>3</sup>Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;

light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

<sup>4</sup>lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"  
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

<sup>5</sup>But I have trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

<sup>6</sup>I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

### C. The Stanza

1. Longer poems will have two or more strophes that focus on the same theme. A group of closely related strophes is a stanza.
2. Just like strophes, segmenting a poem into stanzas helps us to better understand the flow of the poet's thoughts and helps us understand the poem and what is being read.

## II. Parallelism

A. Parallelism is a relationship of correspondence between the cola (phrases) of a poetic line.

1. How does parallelism work? There are 3 types of understanding:
  - a.  $A \neq B$  (dominant approach prior to 1750 ad) (gen 21:1)
  - b.  $A = B$  (traditional approach)
  - c. A, what's more B (modern approach)

This approach draws from the insight of the two extremes and brings it in between. This is saying something similar in both cola but with a difference added in the second colon.

2. Three categories of parallelism
  - a. Synonymous -- repetition of the same thought in the 2 phrases
  - b. Antithetic -- same thought is expressed from 2 opposite views
  - c. Synthetic -- the second line completes or supplements the first (used as a catchall)  
-ex. Ps. 2:6 -- I have installed my king // on zion, my holy hill

## III. Imagery

A. Imagery is figurative or descriptive language in a literary work to evoke a vivid picture and image in a person's mind.

1. Poetry is rich and dense with images.
2. Types of images: Simile - explicit comparison with the words *like* or *as*  
Metaphor - implicit comparison without the words *like* or *as*

### C. How an image works

1. An image compares two things which are similar in some ways but dissimilar in other ways. The dissimilarity is what surprises us and causes us to take notice. Then we look for the similarity.

Ps. 18:2

The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,  
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,  
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Ps. 91:4

He will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

### D. Why use images?

1. Images engage the mind and touch the emotions.

"Images touch our emotions because they weave vivid pictures from the fabric of ordinary life." (Futato, 42)

2. Images are not as precise as literal language, but whatever is lost in precision is gained in vividness of expression.

a. Example: Psalm 23:1 *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

Why not just say that the LORD loves us and guides us? Isn't it more straightforward?

The image of a shepherd speaks directly to our hearts because we understand that shepherd lives with his sheep, watches carefully over them, makes sure that no wolves eat them, cares for all their needs, keeps them from getting lost, etc. It's a powerful image of God's love for his people.

E. To properly appreciate and understand the imagery, we need to realize many biblical images are foreign to our culture.

1. Israel was an agrarian culture. The impact of the images may be diminished for us because most of us do not understand the ancient culture.

2. We need to study and learn their culture and see how the original readers of this psalm would have understood the imagery.