

# Bible Snapshots



**Wisdom literature** –Typically five books are recognized from the Bible as being wisdom literature – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. Other

## **Psalms – Divine Devotions**

**Author** – *Multiple – David, Solomon, sons of Korah, Asaph, Moses*

- The word “psalm” refers to a “song or ode,” sung often with the accompaniment of a musical instrument, as if mentioned throughout the psalms and in 1 Chronicles 16:4-8; 2Chronicles 5:12
- More than a hundred psalms are prefixed by an inscription that details the poetry style, usage, directions for the musician, subject or occasion of the writing. Some of these are thought to be later additions
- The book is made up of 150 independent compositions. Though the Jewish people divided the book into five different sections there really is no rationale that fully explains the division – subject, purpose or otherwise. Thus, to fully study the Psalms each must be considered individually.
- The Psalms have a form and character peculiar to themselves; and with individual diversities of style and subject, they all assimilate to that form, and together constitute a consistent system of moral truth. They are all poetical, and of that peculiar parallelism distinguished Hebrew poetry. They are all lyrical, or songs adapted to musical instruments, and all religious lyrics, or such as were designed to be used in the sanctuary worship.
- The distinguishing feature of the Psalms is their devotional character. Whether their matter be didactic, historical, prophetic, or practical, it is made the ground or subject of prayer, or praise, or both. The doctrines of theology and precepts of pure morality are here inculcated. God’s nature, attributes, perfections, and works of creation, providence, and grace, are unfolded. In the most sublime conceptions of the most exalted verse, His glorious supremacy over the principalities of heaven, earth, and hell, and His holy, wise, and powerful control of all material and immaterial agencies, are celebrated.
- The psalms are quoted in the New Testament more often than any other Old Testament book

## **Principle forms of the Psalms**

- Psalms of praise – usually starts with a praise imperative like “Praise the Lord.”
- Psalms of lament – Characterized by phrase like “Oh Lord,” followed by a complaint or petition
- Psalms of wisdom – detail practical advice about how to live happy, successful, godly lives

## **Key chapter / verse / phrase/ thought**

- It would be very hard to determine a “key” chapter here. Many will say Psalm 23. Others may say Psalm 19. Still others might conclude 119 or 22 or some other. A true key would need to be offered for each Psalm. However, if there were one Psalm that was overarching in its reach in defining the theme of the book it could easily be said that Psalm 1 fits the bill. It contains the general statements of what it means to shun evil and live in righteousness, which is certainly one of the grand themes of the book; a broad heading under which many other psalms would fall.

## **Understanding the musical terms**

- *Mizmor* – means “to pluck” and means there were instruments involved. There are 57 psalms that use this word.
- *Shir* – refers to songs of all kind. There are 30 of these.
- *Maschil* or *Maskil* – denotes a song of special skill or teaching. There are 30 of these.
- *Mitcham* or *Mitkham* – we are uncertain about the meaning, but it could be Hebrew for “precious;” Akkadian for “hidden or unpublished;” or Arabic for “atoning or forgiving.” There are six of these.

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- *Palal* – means prayer – It is found in the superscription of 17, 86, 90, 102, 142 and 122.
- *Selah* – used 71 times in 39 psalms and Habakkuk 3:3, 9, 13. It is uncertain, but commonly accepted to mean either “rest” or “interlude.” It may also mean “to lift.” Some think it is a designation like “amen” and simply means “forever.”
- *Shiggaion* or *Shigionoth* – Used in Psalm 39 and Hab. 3:3, 9, 13. It is a lament or dirge expressing sorrow. Highly emotional poetic form.
- *Neginoth* – Is used six times in the psalms and means “on stringed instruments.”
- *Sheminith* – is used twice and means “on the octave” or “one the eight.”
- *Alamoth* – is used four times and refers to “female soprano voices”
- *Mechiloth* – is used only once and means “on wind instruments”
- *Gittith* – is used three times and mean “on the harp.”

## Purposes of the Psalms

- Intimacy with God – The Israelites believed that all of life was related to God by covenant. The Psalms were a way to express the deepest emotions and devotion toward God. This why they were often used for worship as well.
- Personal faith – most of the psalms were written based on a the writers faith, but then transferred to the larger community of faith (Psalm 23; 139).
- They are revelatory – they reflect truths about God, humanity, sin, hope, and the messiah. This is why they are so often quoted in the New Testament.
- Evidences – Psalms contains many evidences often in the form of simple statements of fact (i.e. – Psalm 19). These are designed to bolster faith.
- Practical training – Much like the Proverbs, the psalms offer some practical wisdom that can be readily applied to life.

## Types of Parallelism – The Hebrew form of poetry in which the psalms are written.

- Synonymous parallelism – (24:2) Thought of the first line repeated in the second line.
- Antithetical – (1:6) – Truth of line 1 strengthened by a contrasting statement in the second.
- Synthetic – (119:11) – First and second lines have some relationship – cause and effect, etc.
- Progressive – several common - Stair-like (1:1) – several steps in the same thought; Climactic (29:1) theme repeated and expanded on.
- Introverted – (91:14ff) First line is closely related in thought to the fourth, and the second to the third.

## Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

- Lacks poetic rhythm – most of the poetry we are used to has an identifiable rhythm. In Hebrew poetry, however, the are of poetic rhythm was secondary in consideration. Their main focus was on the thought.
- Figures of speech – The psalms are filled with figures of speech and must not be seen as literal. For example, in Psalm 18:31 the Lord is called a “rock.” His on only a rock figuratively and in some sense, not all senses. In psalm 51:4 David said he sinned only against God. Of course his sins would have been against Bathsheba and Uriah, but is given here in hyperbolic form to emphasize his grief over the sin. We must deal with these figures in careful ways. One important thing to remember is that every figure of speech must be interpreted in light of its meaning in the setting in which it is used. For instance, in Psalm 23:4 we find the phrase “valley of the shadow of death.” This is often used for funerals, but context would dictate that it means a place of danger or treachery.