

Frequently Asked Questions

Journey Through the Psalms

Presented by Denise Dombkowski Hopkins

1. Did David write the psalms? Probably not. The ancient world was not really interested in authorship or copyrights. It was natural for ancient Israel to tie the psalms to David, who enjoyed a great reputation as singer, musician, and poet. David was introduced into Saul's court as a musician (1 Sam. 16:17,23). David also made Jerusalem his political and religious capital by bringing the Ark of the Covenant (God's portable throne) to it (2 Sam. 6). 1 Chronicles credits David with organizing the choir guilds and worship of the Temple. Designating a psalm "of David" was a way of honoring him.

2. What is a superscription? It is the text printed in small type above the first verse of the psalm. For example, above Psalm 3 is this superscription: "A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom." Superscriptions often contain musical notations, e.g., "with stringed instruments" appears above Psalm 4, and "for flutes" appears above Psalm 5. In all, 117 of the 150 psalms have superscriptions, which were probably added to psalms in the process of collection. A superscription gives us one clue for interpreting a psalm but is not the only clue. Seventy-three of the psalms have "of David" in their superscriptions, but this does not necessarily mean that David wrote the Psalms (see FAQ 1 above).

3. Who are Korah and Asaph? They are the heads of major guilds of Temple singers (2 Chron. 20:19). Their names are found in the superscriptions (see FAQ #2 above) of several psalms: Korah (Psalms 42-49) and Asaph (Psalms 50, 73-83). Perhaps they collected these psalms or were responsible for their musical presentation.

4. What is a Song of Ascent? Psalms 120-134 have this phrase in their superscriptions (see FAQ 2 above). Perhaps these psalms were sung as pilgrims made their way up to Jerusalem.

5. What does "selah" mean? Scholars are not certain. It is perhaps a musical notation or a signal indicating a pause in the recitation of a psalm that allowed for music, dancing, or silence.

6. Why is the Psalter divided into five books? Early Jewish interpretation suggested that the five-fold division was to mirror the five books of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), which would give the psalms authority by association. Each of the five books of psalms ends with a doxology (praise verse to God). These doxologies (Psalms 41:13; 72:19; 89:52; 106:48; and 150:6) act as dividers.

7. Where does the word "psalm" come from? Psalm is the Greek translation (psalmos) of the Hebrew word mizmor that is found in 57 psalm superscriptions (see 2 above). A mizmor is a song sung to musical accompaniment.

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8. What does “hallelujah” mean? The Hebrew title for the whole psalm collection is *tehillim*, which means, “praises” and is formed from the verb root *hll*, “to praise.” To this root is added “jah,” which is the German spelling of the shortened form of *Yahweh*, the divine name that is translated as LORD in most Bibles. Literally, “hallelujah” means, “praise (a plural command) *Yahweh*.” Thus, “hallelujah” means, “praise the LORD.”

9. What does metaphor mean? “Metaphor” (Greek) means literally “to carry across.” A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes one thing in terms of another. It is imaginative speech that helps create visual images. Psalm poetry is saturated with metaphors. Metaphors for God in the psalms include rock, fortress, refuge, deliverer, judge, creator, king. The metaphor of path or way runs like a thread through the collection, reminding Israel how to respond to God.

10. Is anger at God sign of a weak faith? Not in the psalms. Anger is just one of the many human emotions that the psalms express in honest conversation with God. Anger shows how much we depend upon God.

11. What is a Torah psalm? Psalms 1, 19, and 119 are classified as Torah psalms. The Greek translation of the Bible (the Septuagint, third-century B.C.E.) translates Torah as “law,” but the word means much more than that. Torah is God’s “instruction” or “guidance” for Israel, which includes law, but also poetry, story, and genealogy. Jews call the first five books of the Bible the Torah. In Israel, Torah and creation are understood together, for following Torah is the way Israel is supposed to respond to God’s well-ordered creation.

12. What does Zion mean? Scholars are not certain. It is used in the Old Testament as another name for Jerusalem, or for the fortress in the city, or for the Temple mount area upon which God’s sanctuary is found. Zion is also used as a metaphor (see 9 above) for security and protection (Psalm 46; 125; Rev. 14:1).

