

# The Movement and Message of the Psalter: A Compositional Approach

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## “Psalm Terminology”

When we read through the psalms we often skip over the first few lines of the poem thinking that the weird musical notations are most likely unimportant to the study of Scripture. Though this may perhaps be true, it is equally as true that these brief notations are also part of the psalm. That is to say, the psalm headings are just as much Scripture as the actual psalm itself. For this reason I thought it important to create this handout for you to read through. It covers virtually all of the notations that can be found at the beginning of a psalm so that you might have a good idea of what the ancient readers of these psalms would have expected from their titles. I have divided the notations into categories to make looking them up easier.

The first group are *interjections*, which are terms found within the psalm itself. There are two main interjections: *selah* and *higgaion*. The second group are *psalm classifications*, which are terms found in the headings of the psalms that identify what kind of poem follows. The third group are *liturgical notes*, which are notations explaining how the psalm was to be played in the temple or synagogue. Many of these terms are mysterious and rare, and what we have here will only be best guesses according to scholars today. The final group are *authors*, which will include brief biographies of the different authors we find in the Psalter. With the different groupings, I hope that this handout can also serve as kind of a reference guide. I hope it can aid you in your study of the Psalter.

Blessings,

*Andy Witt*

## Interjections

***Selah.*** This word occurs 71 times throughout the book of Psalms (mostly in books I-III), but also appears in some of the other poetry of the Old Testament (i.e. Habakkuk 3). As one author put it, this term is “notoriously obscure,” but it most likely represents a signal for an interlude or a change of musical accompaniment. The term itself remains hard to pin down, and scholars have not come to any consensus on its function.

***Higgaion.*** The term *higgaion* is even more elusive than *selah*. It only occurs three times in the Psalter (Ps 9.16; 19.14; 92.3), once following on the heels of *selah* (9.16). It is frequently related to a root which means to “murmur” or to “meditate,” which has led a majority of scholars to see it as a musical term indicating the quieting of instruments, maybe for the purpose of closer reflection on the words of the poem rather than on the music. It is difficult to say for sure, though. Its root is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to designate a sound as soft as the cooing of a dove (Isa 38.4), as menacing as the roaring of a lion (Isa 31.4), or as gripping as the moaning of a human being (Isa 16.7). In combination with *selah* (Ps 9.16), the effect may even be sinister, for the theme of the psalm where it occurs invokes severe retribution for evildoers on the day of the final judgment.

## Classifications

***Mizmor.*** This term is usually translated “psalm,” and it is the most common poem classification we find in the book, occurring at the head of 57 psalms. It is derived from a Hebrew word meaning “to pinch” or “to caress,” suggesting that the song was accompanied by stringed instruments. In modern times, *psalms* have been divided into several genres, including individual and corporate lament, individual and corporate praises, thanksgivings, supplications, etc. Significantly, it should be noted that not all of the poems in the Psalter are technically “psalms.” There are songs, prayers, and other more elusive classifications, which also make up a significant portion of the book.

**Seir.** Translated “song,” this classification heads 30 psalms, most often attached to a poem already designated a “psalm” (30, 45, 46, 48, 65-68, 75, 76, 83, 87, 88, 92, 108, 120-134). When not attached to a psalm, scholars think that *songs* are much like “psalms,” except that they didn’t necessarily need to be accompanied by instruments. The greatest collection of these songs appears to be the Songs of Ascent, 120-134.

**Shiggaion.** This term only occurs once in the Psalter, in the title to Psalm 7. It is derived from a word suggesting to err, to ramble, to go astray, or to reel. Some linguistics think it may refer to a funeral song or a cry of help. From the rest of the context of Psalm 7, the term could be referring to a poem from one who is crying out concerning his errors or transgressions.

**Miktam.** This title is found in Psalms 16 and 56-60, which are all Davidic psalms. Depending on which root it comes from, it can either refer to a song of confession or expiation (from the Akkadian root *katamu*, “to cover”) or to a secret prayer (from the Hebrew root *katam*, “to hide”). The latter seems more likely, given the content of the psalms which have this classification. One scholar suggested that given the perils spoken of in the psalms, the utterance of the psalm could hardly have been vocal, suggesting a secret prayer.

**Maskil.** This classification entitles thirteen psalms (32, 42, 44, 45, 52-55, 74, 78, 88, 89, 142), mostly found in Books II and III. It comes from the Hebrew root which means “to make wise/prudent” or “to have success/skill.” In most cases, these are poems of individual meditation, hummed or murmured as private introspection. Like the *miktam*, it seems to imply a musical form, perhaps a cantilena that has to be softly trilled in solitude.

**Tephillah.** Translated “prayer,” it indicates a prayer of petition, intoned in circumstances of calamity, individual or national. Five poems in the Psalter are specifically called “prayers” (17, 86, 90, 102, 142), even though it seems that most of the Davidic poems before Psalm 73 were considered prayers as well (see 72.20). Those specifically called prayers are attributed to David (17, 86, 142), Moses (90), and a model of the “lowly man” (102).

***Tehillah.*** Even though this word, the word for “praise,” occurs 30 times throughout the Psalter, only once does it occur in the title of a psalm (145). It indicates a poem that focuses, somewhat obviously, on the praise of Yhwh. As the final psalm of the Psalter before its concluding anthem of praise (Psalms 146-150), the title of the 145 as “praise” is somewhat fitting with the overall strategy of the book. In fact, the final name given to the entire book in Hebrew is “Praises”, or *Tehillim*.

### **Liturgical Notes**

The plurality of the liturgical notes evokes a “wealth of melodies on which the Psalms were sung and sometimes the instrumentation that accompanied the singing.” Many of these terms are quite obscure in the Hebrew, and were lost to many of the early translations in Greek (LXX) and Latin (Vulgate). Even comparison to similar cognates in other ancient Near-Eastern languages yields little.

***For the leader/choirmaster.*** This is by far the most common note, accompanying 55 psalms, as well as the psalm in Habakkuk 3. Its Hebrew root means “to excel”, and a fit rendering of the term is probably, “to attend to” or “to superintend.” This has led to the familiar modern translation of the term as “for the leader” or “to the choirmaster.” This, however, was not its ancient interpretation. Intriguingly, the Septuagint (an ancient Jewish translation of the Hebrew into Greek, used much by the early NT church) most often translated the phrase “to the end,” that is, “to the end times,” which carries with it eschatological overtones. Though intriguing, the former definition of the term is probably more accurate, “for the leader.”

***Negina.*** Usually translated, “with instrumental music,” it seems to indicate a more intense version of the *mizmor*. It is used in the heading of Psalms 4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67, and 76.

***Lehazkir.*** Translated, “for the memorial,” this term is found at the head of Psalms 38 and 70. It certainly alludes to some kind of memorial ceremony, the meaning of which is now lost scholars.

**To the Nehkiloth.** Found at the beginning of Psalm 5, the term is derived from a root meaning “flowing swiftly and with waves” (cf. 1 Sam 10.5; 1 Kgs 1.40; Isa 30.29). It may refer to musical instruments (“fluttering flutes”) or to a flowing melody, “to the air of undulating waves.”

**According to the Sheminith.** This note occurs in psalms 6 and 12, and is usually translated, “on the eighth” or “on the octave.” The problem is that the eight-note scale was unknown to the ancient Israelites. It may refer to an eight-stringed instrument, such as a harp. See 1 Chronicles 15.20-21 for another context for the term.

**According to Alamoith.** This note heads Psalm 46, and is a companion term to *Sheminith* in 1 Chronicles 15.20-21. The passage in Chronicles, describing the bringing of the Ark to Jerusalem, tells of either Levites who were to ‘play harps according to Alamoith’, and six who were to ‘lead with lyres according to the Sheminith’. Adding to the enigma, the word is usually translated “girls.”

**According to the Gittith.** Found at the beginning of Psalms 8, 81, and 84, the term is usually left untranslated since scholars are still debating its meaning. Some think it refers to “the man from Gath,” which may be Goliath the Philistine defeated by David (1 Sam 17.4; 21.19). Others think it could be translated, “upon the wine press,” referring to a vintage song, or “upon the guittite,” a musical instrument. A final opinion is that it could be related to the traveling of the Ark from Gath to Jerusalem (2 Sa 6.11).

**According to Muth-labben.** Translated literally, this phrase means, “according to/concerning the death of the son”. It appears in the title of Psalm 9, and there, makes its interpretation quite interesting. It could refer simply to the name of a tune which accompanied the poem, as most modern translations understand it, or it could be an editorial note to draw attention to the death of a son in the Psalter. Only three “sons” have been mentioned in the Psalter thus far: the King (Psalm 2), Absalom (Psalm 3), and the Son of Man (Psalm 8). If it refers to the Son of Man of Psalm 8, the title goes a long way to explaining the interpretation of Hebrews 2.

Other scholars think that the phrase found in Psalm 9.1 is an haplographic error, and should instead be understood as “upon the melody of the virgins” (cf. Psalm 46.1; 1 Chr 15.20).

**According to the Hind of the Dawn.** This notation only appears in Psalm 22, and is usually translated in a way that makes it look like a tune-name. However, it can be translated differently as, “On the help of/at daybreak,” which would make it a kind of glimpse into the theme of the psalm. The Hebrew word *‘ayelleth* is very similar to the word for help in 22.19, and could be revocalized to coincide with it (see also 88.4). In this case, the title would draw attention to the deliverance which will light up the final verses of the psalm.

**According to the Lilies/Lily. A Testimony.** The combination of “lily” (*shushan*) and “testimony” (*eduth*) makes up the titles of Psalms 45, 60, 69, and 80. In Psalm 45 the phrase is followed by a note that it is a love song. Not much more can be said of the title.

**According to Mahalath.** Found at the head of Psalms 53 and 88, the term refers to the proper name a type of ancient dance, *mehkoloth*. In Psalm 88, the word *leannoth* is added, which means, “to humble/afflict.”

**According to the Dove on Far-off Terebinths.** This notation is only found in the title of Psalm 56, but raises the question as to whether or not titles could actually be postscripts to the previous psalms as well. This is because there is an allusion in Psalm 55:6 to a dove and to the far distance, which can hardly be a coincidence. At the same time, it could simply be one way to say that Psalm 56 should be played to the same tune as the previous psalm.

**According to Do Not Destroy.** Found at the head of Psalms 57-59 and 75, the term appears to refer to a popular melody of the ancient world, to which several sets of words were applied. It could also be translated, “Do not place in the winepress” (cf. Isa 65.8). There are several other allusions to this phrase in the Hebrew Bible (1 Sam 26.9; Deut 9.26), which, in concert with Isa 65.8, would help bring out the theme of ultimate trust which is so prevalent in these psalms.

***A Song of Ascents.*** This title heads the collection of psalms from 120-134. The Mishnah picked up of the 15 songs and correlated them with the 15 steps which led up from the Court of the Women to the Court of the Israelites in the Temple. That said, the most likely reference of the title is to the pilgrimage up to Jerusalem, or the processional ascent of “the hill of the Lord” (cf. Isa 30.29).

Outside of all these terms, there also occur historical notes which connect fourteen psalms with events in the life of David, connecting with the book of Samuel (Ps 3, 7, 18, 30, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142).

### **Authors**

***David.*** Nearly half of the Psalter (73 psalms) is attributed to David. As such, the entire book itself has been called “David” (Heb 4.7). He is known as the “sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam 23.1), as an inventor of musical instruments (Amos 6.5), and also as a prophet (2 Sam 23.1-3). His designation as a prophet will prove to be a fruitful one as we seek to understand what David is writing about.

***Solomon.*** The titles to Psalms 72 and 127 have Solomon as the author, although some scholars dispute that the title to Psalm 72 should be interpreted as “about/for Solomon,” instead of “By Solomon.” The content of Psalm 72, however, correlates well with the wisdom that Solomon possessed in the book of Kings, and there is no reason why his authorship should be doubted.

***The Sons of Korah.*** There are twelve psalms attributed to the Sons of Korah (42-49, 84-85, 87-88). They are members of the Levites and are direct descendants of the rebel Korah from Numbers 26.10. To our great gain his children were spared, and were appointed as singers, doorkeepers, and guardians of the Temple (1 Chron 9.17; 6.31-44). Some of their fold, most notably Heman and Jeduthun (Ethan), were considered prophets in Israel (1 Kgs 25.1-3).

**Asaph.** Twelve songs are attributed to Asaph (50, 73-83). Asaph was also a Levite and was a musician very close to David (1 Chr 6.31-44; 16.5; 2 Chr 29.30). Some of these psalms (74, 79) probably were written by his descendants, since they tell of disasters witnessed by no contemporary of David.

**Heman the Ezrahite.** Only Psalm 88 has Heman as the author, but makes his appearance in the Hebrew Bible as the founder of the choir known as “the sons of Korah.” He was also famed for his wisdom (1 Ki 4.31). The name ‘Ezrahite’ seems to be an equivalent to Zerahite, a clan of Judah (1 Chr 2.6), although Heman was also a Levite with Ephraimite connections (1 Ch 6.33; 1 Sa 1.1).

**Ethan the Ezrahite.** Psalm 89 is attributed to Ethan, who is probably identical with Jeduthun from 1 Chr. 15.19 (cf. 2 Chr 5.12), who founded one of the three choirs. He shared with Heman a reputation for wisdom, and membership of the same Judahite clan. With the identification with Jeduthun, Psalms 39, 62, and 77, come into the picture, since they have the name Jeduthun in their titles. Jeduthun was one of the chief musicians appointed by David to lead public worship (cf. 1 Chr 16.41; 25.1-3).

**Moses.** We even have a psalm attributed to Moses within the Psalter. For a long time scholars disputed this claim to authorship, though recent excavations in Ugarit have found similar style in poems stretching back to the time of Moses. Given this find, as well as several affinities in the poem to Genesis 1-3, Deut 32-33, and Deut 3, the claim for Mosaic authorship is set of firm ground.

### Resources Used

Kidner, Derek. *Psalms 1-72 (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, 14a)*. Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973.

Terrien, Samuel. *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003.