

## Explaining and Applying Old Testament Poetry

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### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PSALMS

- The psalms are part of “all Scripture” and are “profitable” (2 Tim 3:16).
- The psalms contain rich and vivid theology.
- The psalms reflect genuine human experience.
- Jesus used the psalms more often in his preaching and teaching than any other OT book, and most of the New Testament authors quote from the psalms often.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PSALMS

- Structure
  - Line
    - The basic unit of Hebrew poetry, containing one “complete parallelistic expression of thought” (Futato, p28).
    - A line can be made up of two cola (a *bicolon*), three cola (a *tricolon*), or even four cola (a *tetracolon* or *quatrain*).
  - Strophe
    - Lines are grouped together into strophes (like paragraphs in prose).
    - There will typically be an extra space between strophes in modern translations (like paragraph indentions in English prose).
    - The basis of grouping lines together into a strophe is the *sense*.
  - Refrain
    - A refrain is a recurring line, providing an obvious division in the poem.
    - A refrain often marks the beginning or end of a strophe or stanza (a group of strophes sharing a common theme (Ps. 57:5, 11).
  - Inclusion (*envelope figure*)
    - An inclusion is a repetition of key words or phrases at the beginning and ending of a section (Ps 103; Ps 145).
    - Inclusions can mark a verse, a strophe, or an entire poem and stress a theme.
  - Chiasm
    - A chiastic structure is the repetition of ideas with the repeated elements arranged in reverse order the second time (Hahne, p8).
    - The center of the chiasm is often the main point of the poem.

- Chiasm may occur within a line or in a larger section (Ps 83:2; Ps. 51:1-9).
- Parallelism
  - Parallelism is the most distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry.
  - Parallelism is saying something similar in each colon but often with a difference added in the second (or third) colon.
  - Parallelism can be between two or three lines or between verses of poetry (Ps 3:1-2; 139:8-9).
  - Different kinds of parallelism:
    - *Repeating* (=) – saying the same thing using different words
    - *Contrasting* (≠) – saying the same thing with opposite expressions
    - *Supplementing* (+) – adding new information
- Figurative Language
  - Hebrew poetry uses many metaphors—using one concrete reality to describe another.
  - Figurative language provides mental pictures, engaging the mind and the imagination.
  - Metaphors in the psalms often describe human experiences (Wright, p230).
    - Psalm 42:1 – The psalmist compares himself to a deer.
    - Psalm 69:2 – The psalmist is sinking in the mud.
  - Metaphors in the psalms speak powerfully about God (Wright, p230).
    - Psalm 18 – *The Lord is my rock and my fortress...my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*
    - Psalm 23 – *The Lord is my shepherd...*
- Human Emotion
  - The psalms are filled with expressions of human emotions.
    - Joy and happiness
    - Gratitude and thanksgiving
    - Agony and despair
    - Pain and hurt
  - Entering into the emotions of the author will enhance understanding of the psalm.

## CATEGORIES OF PSALMS

- Psalms of Lament
  - Psalms of lament are songs of protest arising out of distress, when one is feeling perplexed, forsaken, or overwhelmed

- They typically include:
  - Mourning about the attack of his enemies
  - Complaining about himself
  - Expressing disappointment with God
- A lament typically moves “from negative to positive” (Futato, p151).
- The structure of a lament psalm (Wright, p238):
  - An invocation
  - A complaint regarding suffering
  - A complaint about God not hearing or helping
  - A question about how long
  - A curse on enemies (in some)
  - A confession of sin (in some)
  - A plea for deliverance
  - A statement of confidence in God and a vow to praise Him (in most)
- Example: Psalm 6

Structure	Verses
An invocation	
A complaint regarding suffering	
A complaint about God not hearing or helping	
A question about how long	
A curse on enemies (in some)	
A confession of sin (in some)	
A plea for deliverance	
A statement of confidence in God and a vow to praise Him (in most)	
An invocation	

- Psalms of Praise (or Hymns)
  - Psalms of praise extol God for His greatness and goodness.
  - They are hymns that celebrate who Yahweh is and what He has done, especially in relation to creation and redemption.
  - The structure of a psalm of Praise:
    - A call to praise
    - A cause for praise
    - A renewed call to praise
  - Example: Psalm 117

Structure	Verses
A call to praise	
A cause for praise	
A renewed call to praise	

- Psalms of Thanksgiving
  - Psalms of thanksgiving express gratitude for deliverance or provision after pain.
  - They are similar to praise psalms but are more focused on a specific act of God.
  - The structure of thanksgiving psalms (DeRouchie, p73):
    - Introduction of praise, addressed to God
    - Misery or trouble reported
    - Appeal for others to praise God
    - Rescue announced
    - Testimony of vow or praise
  - Example: Psalm 30

Structure	Verses
Introduction of praise, addressed to God	
Misery or trouble reported	
Appeal for others to praise God	
Rescue announced	
Testimony of vow or praise	

- Royal Psalms (or Kingship and Covenant)
  - Royal psalms celebrate and affirm loyalty to God and His covenants.
  - Many songs were written about or for the king, some for the time of coronation.
  - From the exile onward, these are interpreted messianically, expressing the expectation that God would raise up Israel’s true King.
  - The royal psalms have no common structure.
  - Example: Psalm 2
- Psalms of Trust (or Confidence)
  - Psalms of trust express God’s trustworthiness and resolve to trust in Him.
  - They declare confidence in the Lord, yet still out of the midst of pain.
  - “Whereas laments focus on the problem, psalms of trust focus on the answer, but both are prayers grown out of a context of suffering” (DeRouchie, p71).
  - The psalms of trust lack a clear structure, but typically share several common characteristics:
    - A declaration of trust
    - The basis for trust: The character of God
    - An invitation to trust
  - Example: Ps 23
    - Vv1-3 – Certainty and rest in God’s provision
    - Vv4-6 – Certainty and rest in God’s protection

- Wisdom Psalms
  - Wisdom psalms emphasize the law of God as the basis for a blessed life and contrast the righteous with the wicked.
  - They encourage us to trust in the Lord and not ourselves.
  - Example: Psalm 1

- The Psalms Listed by Categories

<b>Lament</b>	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14 (= 53), 17, 22, 26, 27, 28, 35, 38, 39, 41, 42/43, 44, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 74, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85, 86, 88, 90, 94, 102, 106, 108, 109, 120, 123, 126, 130, 137, 140, 141, 142, 143 (Penitential Psalms = 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143; Imprecatory Psalms = 35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137)
<b>Trust</b>	11, 16, 23, 91, 121, 125, 129, 131
<b>Thanksgiving</b>	30, 66, 92, 107, 116, 118, 124, 138
<b>Praise/Hymn</b>	8, 29, 33, 46, 47, 48, 76, 84, 87, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 103, 104, 105, 111, 113, 114, 117, 122, 134, 135, 136, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150 (Songs of Zion = 46, 48, 76, 84, 87; Enthronement of YHWH Psalms = 47, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99)
<b>Royal</b>	2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144
<b>Wisdom/Torah</b>	1, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128
<b>Liturgy</b>	15, 24 (cf. also 136)
<b>Historical</b>	78 (cf. also 105, 106, 107, 114)
<b>Mixed</b>	9/10, 19, 25, 31, 32, 34, 36, 40, 65, 89, 119
<b>Unclear</b>	50, 52, 62, 67, 68, 75, 81, 115, 133, 139
Prepared by John C. Crutchfield for <i>What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About: A Survey of Jesus' Bible</i> , ed. Jason S. DeRouchie (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 342. Used by permission.	

## GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING AND DEVELOPING A MESSAGE FROM A PSALM

- Read the psalm aloud multiple times.
  - This will familiarize you with the content.
  - This will help you recognize patterns, chiasms, and repetitions.
- Consider the context.
  - Literary
  - Historical
- Discern the structure.
  - Identify strophic (main) divisions.
  - Look for the patterns typical of a specific subgenre.
  - Identify the parallelisms.
- Identify and interpret figurative language.
  - Identify the *target domain* (the “subject the author is speaking of”).
  - Study the *source domain* (the “aspect of ordinary life the poet is drawing from”).
  - Identify the aspect of the source that is associated with the target (e.g. Ps 127:4)
  - Be careful when teaching the metaphors in the psalms.
    - Watch for shifts in imagery (e.g. Ps 23 – shepherd and host).
    - Avoid applying the metaphor beyond the author’s point of comparison (e.g. Ps 23 – we’re not to act like sheep).
- Discern the emotion of the psalm.
- Identify key words.
  - Notice a refrain or recurring words and phrases.
  - Define unfamiliar words.
- Identify the theology in the psalm: What does the writer say about God?
  - What pictures are used for God?
  - What characteristics of God are mentioned?
  - What actions of God are described—past, present, or future?
  - What reasons does this psalm give for trusting God, or for obeying Him, or for not giving up in faith?
- Determine the big idea of the psalm.
  - What is the subject (often stated in the first couple verses)?
  - How is the big idea developed (how the main ideas of each stanza work together to form a theme)?

- What is the conclusion?
- Note: The following are additional questions to determine the meaning of the psalm (Wright, p249).
  - What truths about the world, the people of Israel, or other nations are mentioned or implied?
  - In what ways does this psalm connect with the New Testament, with Christ, the gospel, or the church?
  - Is this psalm quoted in the New Testament, and if so, why?
- Develop an outline of the psalm.
  - Summarize the main idea of each stanza.
  - Develop an outline that communicates the main ideas and the flow of thought of the psalm.
  - Structure the outline using coordination and subordination.
  - State the key points as timeless principles (rather than historical statements).
- Develop explanation for each principle, drawing from your interpretive research.
- Develop application (asking and answering the “so what?”).
  - What is the significance of the message of the poem for your own life and the lives of the audience?
  - In what ways should we respond to this psalm in our understanding of our faith and in persevering in our faith?
  - Relate the principles to current real-life issues.

### Resources:

Akin, Daniel. *Engaging Exposition*.  
 Bullock, C. Hassell. *Encountering the Book of Psalms*.  
 DeRouchie, Jason S. *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*  
 Futato, Mark D. *Interpreting the Psalms*.  
 Jacobson and Jacobson. *Invitation to the Psalms*.  
 Hahne, Harry. “Interpreting Biblical Poetry” Hermeneutics Outline.  
 Kaiser, Walter C. *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament*.  
 Kidner, Derek. *Psalms 1-72, 73-150*.  
 McCabe, Robert V. “Preaching from the Psalms.”  
 Travers, Michael. *Encountering God in the Psalms*.  
 Wright, Christopher J. H. *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth*.

**Practice Exercise: Psalm 62 (ESV)**

**Steps:**

- Read the Psalm
- Identify types of parallelism
- Write a concise summary of each strophe (1 phrase/sentence)
- Highlight figures of speech (for future research)
- Underline key words (verbs, theological terms, recurring words, unfamiliar words)
- Using the shared characteristics of a psalm of trust (see notes), label the strophes using those characteristics (as much as is workable)

(1) For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.

(2) He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress;  
I shall not be greatly shaken.

*Summary:* \_\_\_\_\_

(3) How long will all of you attack a man to batter him,  
like a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

(4) They only plan to thrust him down from his high  
They take pleasure in falsehood.  
They bless with their mouths,  
but inwardly they curse. Selah

*Summary:* \_\_\_\_\_

(5) For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,  
for my hope is from him.

(6) He only is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

(7) On God rests my salvation and my glory;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

*Summary:* \_\_\_\_\_

(8) Trust in him at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before him;  
God is a refuge for us. Selah

*Summary:* \_\_\_\_\_

<u>Parallelism</u>	<u>Trust Characteristic</u>
Supplementing	
Supplementing	Declaration of trust
Supplementing	
Supplementing	
Contrasting	Description of suffering
Supplementing	
Supplementing	
Repeating	Declaration of trust
Supplementing	
Supplementing	An invitation to trust

(9) Those of low estate are but a breath;  
 those of high estate are a delusion;  
 in the balances they go up;  
 they are together lighter than a breath.  
 (10) Put no trust in extortion;  
 set no vain hopes on robbery;  
 if riches increase, set not your heart on them.

Summary: \_\_\_\_\_

(11) Once God has spoken;  
 twice have I heard this:  
 that power belongs to God,  
 (12) and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love.  
 For you will render to a man  
 according to his work.

Summary: \_\_\_\_\_

Contrasting	An invitation <i>not</i> to trust
Supplementing	
Repeating	
Supplementing	The basis for trust
Supplementing	
Supplementing	

(Steps continued)

- Based on your observations above, try to articulate the “big idea” of the psalm (in one sentence)
- Using your strophe summaries and characteristics you’ve identified, write an “outline”—a simple bullet point flow of thought for the psalm.

**Big Idea:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Outline** (Not a polished message-ready outline, but a summary of the flow of thought that you can build on as you add word meanings, figurative language significance, and commentary study):

- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.
- V.