



# An Introduction to the Psalms

The word Psalm means “song.” The Hebrew word is *tellihim*, but in the Greek translation it is *psalmoi*, which refers to songs that used musical instruments. So the book of Psalms is like a hymn book. These are songs of faith that express the feelings and prayers of the people of Israel.

Because it is much like a hymnbook, there are often musical directions in the psalms. Sometimes you see words like *Selah* at the end of a verse. That’s like a rest symbol in music. It simply meant to pause at that point as the psalm was sung.

Other psalms sometimes have words at the top before the first verse that give musical direction. For instance, Psalm 16 is called “A miktam of David.” We don’t really know what miktam means. It’s believed to have been an ancient musical direction, perhaps telling how fast or slow to sing.

Half of the psalms are attributed to David. David was the second king of Israel who was known to be a musician and who sang songs to the Lord. But we don’t believe David wrote all the psalms attributed to him. Most were probably written by anonymous authors and credited to David. That’s why in this series I will often speak of “the writer of the psalm” or “the psalmist.”

If you read through all of Psalms you will note that they are divided into 5 Books with these divisions:

- Book 1: Psalms 1-41
- Book 2: Psalms 42-72
- Book 3: Psalms 73-89
- Book 4: Psalms 90-106
- Book 5: Psalms 107-150

This division is not because the books categorize the psalms, rather, it is believed to be a symbol for Torah (the law of God) which includes the first five books of the Old Testament.

Scattered throughout all the books are the different types of psalms. Scholars categorize the psalms somewhat differently, but basically these are the major types of psalms: Thanksgiving, Lament, Praise, Royal Psalms (which relate to the king of Israel), and Trust. All of these psalms articulate many different emotions: fear, praise, anger, gratitude, joy, despair. The Psalms make it okay for us to be real to God, and this is what makes the Book of Psalms a wonderful guide for our own prayers and worship.