

## THE PSALMS

### THE TITLES OF THE PSALMS

1. The superscriptions or titles found to many of the Psalms (116 have titles) are not thought to be part of the original text but do reflect an ancient and reliable description of the setting or occasion of writing. The Hebrew texts include them as part of the text of the Psalm. Some English versions, such as the New English Bible and the Good News Bible do not include them at all. Some of the terms used in some of the titles are obscure and their meaning cannot be ascertained for certain. Often the translators have simply transliterated the Hebrew word into English rather than try to offer an English equivalent. These titles reflect:
  - i) The style or character of the Psalm.
  - ii) The musical setting.
  - iii) The occasion for use.
  - iv) Authorship.
  - v) The occasion of writing.
2. Titles that reflect the **style or character** of the Psalm
  - i) **MIZMOR** – Translated as “Psalm” – occurs in 57 titles, e.g. Psalm 98. It is often followed by the name of the author, e.g. Psalm 101. It means ‘a song with instrumental accompaniment.’
  - ii) **SHIR** – Translated as “Song” – occurs in 30 titles, e.g. Psalm 108. It is a general term for a song.
  - iii) **MASKIL** – occurs in 13 titles, e.g. Psalm 32; 42. The meaning of the term is uncertain. It may mean a teaching psalm or a meditation, or a psalm of understanding.
  - iv) **MIKHTAM** – occurs in 6 titles, e.g. Psalm 16; 56-60. All are attributed to David. The meaning is obscure. Some suggest the word means ‘engraving’ or ‘inscription.’ Or it means a ‘golden psalm’ (AV margin).
  - v) **SHIGGAION** – occurs once in Psalm 7 and also Habakkuk 3:1. Again, the term is obscure. It may mean ‘to stray, stagger.’
  - vi) **TEPILLA** – Translated, “A Prayer” – occurs in 5 titles: Psalms 17, 86, 90, 102, 142.
  - vii) **TEHILLAH** - Song of Praise – occurs once: Psalm 145.

3. Titles reflecting the **musical setting** of the Psalm: How the psalms are to be sung, played.
- i) **NEGINOTH** – Translated, “With stringed instruments” - occurs in 6 titles, e.g. Psalm 4, 6, 54, 55.
  - ii) **NEHILOTH** – Translated, “For the flutes” - occurs once: Psalm 5.
  - iii) **ALAMOTH** – Occurs in title of Psalm 46. May indicate the psalm is to be song by sopranos. Cf. 1 Chronicles 15:20.
  - iv) **SHEMINITH** – “the eighth” - Occurs in titles of Psalms 6,12. May indicate the psalm is to be sung by bass singers. Cf. 1 Chronicles 15:21.
  - v) **GITTITH** – Occurs in titles of Psalms 8,81,84. Possibly refers to an instrument or tune from the city of Gath.
  - vi) **JEDUTHUN** – Occurs in titles of Psalms 39,62,77. Jeduthun is named as a Levitical singer in 1 Chronicles 16:41-42; 2 Chronicles 5:12. The psalm may have been sung according to a melody composed by Jeduthun.
  - vii) **The Hind of the Dawn** – (AV, **AJELETH SHAHAR**) – Psalm 22. Possibly refers to the melody.
  - viii) **The Lily of the Testimony** (NIV) – (RSV, **SHUSHAN EDUTH**) – Psalm 60. Possibly the melody.
  - ix) **Lilies** – (AV, **SHOSHANNIM**) – Psalms 45, 69, 80.
  - x) **The Dove on Far-Off Terebinths** – Psalm 56.
  - xi) **Do Not Destroy** (AV, **AL TASCHITCH**) – Psalms 57, 58, 59, 75.
  - xii) **MUTH-LABBEN** – Psalm 9 – Possibly means “Die for the son.”
  - xiii) **MAHALATH** – Psalm 53, 88.
  - xiv) **To the Choirmaster** (Chief Musician) – occurs 55 times. Indicates the use of the psalm in the temple services. E.g. Psalm 84, 85.
  - xv) **SELAH** – A musical expression – occurs 71 times throughout the Psalms. E.g. Psalm 75:3; 77:3,9,15. Found three times in Habakkuk 3 (v.3,9,13). It may be an instruction to make the music louder or softer, or to indicate an interlude.
  - xvi) **HIGGAION SELAH** – Occurs once in Psalm 9:16. May mean a quiet interlude.
4. Titles reflecting **the occasion** for use of the Psalm
- i) **A song for the Sabbath** – Psalm 92.
  - ii) **For the memorial offering** (LEHAZKIR, NIV, “A Petition”) – Psalm 38, 70.
  - iii) **For the thank offering** – Psalm 100.

- iv) **A song at the dedication of the temple** – Psalm 30.
- v) **A love song** – Psalm 45.
- vi) **Song of Ascents** – Psalms 120-134 – A collection of songs sung by the Jews when returning from exile or when going up to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage.

5. Titles reflecting **the authorship** of the Psalms

- i) **Moses** – One Psalm attributed to him - Psalm 90.
- ii) **David** – 73 Psalms attributed to him – E.g. Psalms 38, 40.
- iii) **Solomon** – 2 Psalms attributed to him – Psalms 72 & 127.
- iv) **Asaph** – 12 Psalms – E.g. Psalm 50, 73, 74. Asaph was one of David's leading musicians (1 Chronicles 16:4-6).
- v) **Heman** – Psalm 88. Cf. 1 Chronicles 6:33; 1 Kings 4:31.
- vi) **Ethan** – Psalm 89. Cf. 1 Chronicles 6:44; 1 Kings 4:31.
- vii) **The sons of Korah** – 11 Psalms attributed to them. E.g. Psalms 42, 44, 45. Descendants of Korah (Exodus 6:18,21; 2 Chron. 20:19)

6. Titles reflecting **the occasion or situation** in which the Psalm was composed

- i) Times when David was being persecuted by Saul – E.g. Psalms 52, 54, 57, 59.
- ii) When David was delivered from his enemies – Psalm 18.
- iii) The occasion of Joab's victory over Edom – Psalm 60.
- iv) David's adultery with Bathsheba – Psalm 51.
- v) David's flight from his son Absalom – Psalm 3.
- vi) A psalm written by one who is suffering – Psalm 102.

34 Psalms bear no title at all – known as 'orphan psalms.'

7. The titles can help to inform us about the psalm we are reading; although they are not part of the original, inspired text they are to be regarded as old and reliable.

R.K. Harrison (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1979, IVP, p.977), "It seems probable that in at least some instances the titles were the result of editorial activity that may well have been intended to preserve some historical tradition with respect to specific compositions, or to perpetuate a certain familiar usage, whether in connection with the origin, character, music, or liturgical function of the psalm. There appears to be little doubt that the vast majority of the titles were later than the psalms to which they were attached, although this may not be entirely true of certain of the psalms ascribed to David. From the evidence furnished by the LXX version it is apparent that the titles were well-known long before the

Christian period, and they should therefore be regarded as preserving certain Jewish traditions about the psalms and probably about the manner in which the Psalter was compiled.”

Tremper Longman III (*Psalms*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, 2014, IVP, p.24), “The titles were certainly not written by the original composer of the text, but rather by a later editor. However, they were added to the text before the close of the canonical period, probably by the editors who were responsible for the final organization of the book. They thus, at least represent early tradition, and interpretation of the psalms should take into account the information in the title. Indeed, these titles should be considered canonical.”