

# A PLACE FOR PRAISE

*Ancient Psalms for Modern Times*



AN EIGHT-WEEK STUDY WITH

Dr. Tony W. Cartledge

THE *Nur*uring  
FATH™  
BIBLE STUDY SERIES

© 2015

Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,  
[www.nurturingfaith.net](http://www.nurturingfaith.net).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-938514-74-6

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America

*Unless otherwise indicated, scripture quotations are taken from  
the New Revised Version of the Bible.*

Cover photo by John Pierce.

A view of the Sea of Galilee from the Mount of the Beatitudes.

Also available in

THE *Nurturing*  
FAITH™  
BIBLE STUDY SERIES



PSALMING THE BLUES  
*At the Intersection of Pain and Praise*

A SEVEN-WEEK STUDY WITH  
Dr. Tony W. Cartledge

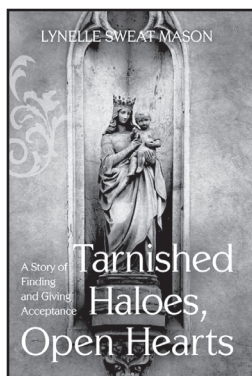
*Nurturing* FAITH  
BIBLE STUDY SERIES

Sponsored by Bob and Pat Barber and the Bob Barber Company of Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina

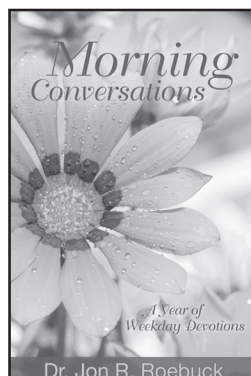
*Psalming the Blues:*  
*At the Intersection of Pain and Praise*  
A seven-week study with Dr. Tony W. Cartledge

Order now at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net)

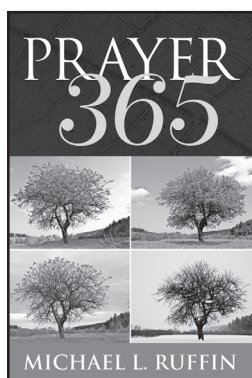
# Other resources from *Nurturing Faith* BOOKS



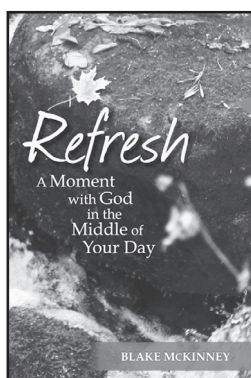
By Lynelle Sweat Mason



By Jon R. Roebuck



By Michael Ruffin



By Blake McKinney



Order now at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net)

# CONTENTS



Preface.....	vii
Psalms, Then and Now.....	1
Lesson 1 .....	9
Psalm 19	
<i>A Surprising Gift</i>	
Lesson 2 .....	17
Psalm 29	
<i>O Worship the King</i>	
Lesson 3 .....	25
Psalm 30	
<i>Thank the Lord!</i>	
Lesson 4 .....	33
Psalm 32	
<i>For the Love of God</i>	
Lesson 5 .....	41
Psalm 95	
<i>Challenging Praise</i>	
Lesson 6 .....	49
Psalm 100	
<i>God Is Great, God Is Good . . .</i>	
Lesson 7 .....	55
Psalm 104	
<i>Let All Creation Sing</i>	
Lesson 8 .....	63
Psalm 118	
<i>Hosanna!</i>	
Afterword.....	71

## ABBREVIATIONS

ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
NET	New English Translation (also known as the NETBible)
LXX	Septuagint, an early Greek translation of the Old Testament
MT	Masoretic Text, the “standard” Hebrew text of the Old Testament
NASB	New American Standard Bible, 1977 edition
NAS95	New American Standard Bible, 1995 edition
NIV	New International Version, 1984 edition
NIV11	New International Version, 2011 edition
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

## PREFACE



**B**ible study is a discipline that calls for the engagement of both hearts and minds. The Nurturing Faith Bible Study Series is designed to focus attention on biblical texts that expand the mind and enrich the heart.

Dr. Tony Cartledge brings the insights of a scholar, the heart of a pastor, and the communication skills of a seasoned writer and editor to this important task. With careful scholarship he guides learners to a clearer understanding of the context—language, culture, and setting—in which the biblical accounts occurred.

Then the important question is considered, “How do these ancient words speak to us as people of faith today?” Truth—not bound by time and culture—awaits those who are willing to explore, contemplate, and apply these biblical treasures.

Bible study deserves the best of both hearts and minds. So as a distinguishing mark, the Nurturing Faith Bible Study Series does not attempt to “dumb down” the lessons or to ignore the challenges of serious inquiry.

Therefore, each lesson contains “The Hardest Question” in which Dr. Cartledge both raises and responds to such challenges in understanding and applying the biblical revelation to today’s living.

An honest wrangling with the biblical text—while guided by God’s Spirit—can produce clearer understanding and stronger commitments. Such Bible study will indeed nurture one’s faith.

The Bible is a compilation of sacred literature—diverse in style and genre. For example, these lessons from the Psalms explore the unique characteristics of Hebrew poetry.

The particular psalms selected for this study focus on the timeless priority for people of faith: offering praise to God. These psalms urge believers toward the attitude and practice of praise in times of struggle and joy.

May these eight sessions of studying Psalms bring both new insight into this ancient Hebrew poetry and a refreshed experience of heartfelt gratitude and praise.

—*John D. Pierce, Publisher*  
*Nurturing Faith, Inc.*

This volume in the Nurturing Faith Bible Study Series is made possible through a generous gift from Bob and Pat Barker and the Bob Barker Company of Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina.

\*\*\*

Nurturing Faith seeks sponsors for future volumes in this Bible study series.  
To inquire, please contact [office@nurturingfaith.net](mailto:office@nurturingfaith.net).



# PSALMS, THEN AND NOW



## INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

**W**e can't begin to appreciate the psalms unless we recognize that they were written as poetry, with many of them intended for singing as well as reading or reciting. One can enjoy the psalms and profit from reading them without knowing a thing about Hebrew poetry, but learning a few nuances of Hebrew poetry can enhance both our appreciation and knowledge of the psalms.

Hebrew poetry is both like and unlike its English counterpart. To begin, with the exception of English free verse, both Hebrew and English poets speak in related phrases designed to carry a thought forward in lyrical fashion, generally following a detectable **rhythm**, or meter.

When we speak of meter, we think of rhythm, a pattern of beats that repeat. For example, we're familiar with these lines:

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house  
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

These verses are written in a meter called "anapestic tetrameter," in which each line contains four units, each of which includes two weak beats and a strong one.

We notice a clear pattern of beats, in which both accented and unaccented syllables play a role. We also hear a system of rhyme, with similar sounds occurring in a predictable pattern. In Hebrew poetry, the beat consists only of accented syllables, and the accented syllables are always on the important words. The neat interlude of the same number of unaccented syllables is not a primary characteristic, however. Sometimes a meter is generally recognizable (e.g. 3:3, 3:2), but the concept of "rhythm" in English and Hebrew poetry is somewhat different.

A second thing we generally associate with poetry is the concept of **rhyme**. Again, with the exception of free verse, we expect an arrangement in which patterns of lines end with the same sound.

Consider Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," which begins like this:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
 And sorry I could not travel both  
 And be one traveler, long I stood  
 And looked down one as far as I could  
 To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Here, Frost uses a rhyming pattern of a-b-a-a-b.

Or consider this example of a limerick, which follows an a-a-b-b-a pattern. This one has been attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes:

God's plan made a hopeful beginning,  
 But Man spoilt his chances by sinning.  
     We trust that the story  
     Will end in great glory,  
 But at present the other side's winning.

Rhyme is important to much English poetry, but is rare in Hebrew poetry. The latter rarely repeats sounds, but that does not mean it is not interested in repetition. In fact, Hebrew poetry is all about repetition, with its primary characteristic being a repetition of thoughts: Its “rhyme” is one of sense rather than sound.

The basic unit of Hebrew verse is a couplet (also called a “bicola”) in which the second line is roughly **parallel** to the first. Since the groundbreaking study of Bishop Robert Lowth,<sup>1</sup> scholars have recognized several variations in the pattern, but all of them in some way involve parallelism.

In *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Robert Alter argues that the primary purpose of parallelism is for following lines to intensify the previous ones. Thus, he describes all types of parallelism as “structures of intensification.”<sup>2</sup>

The easiest type of parallelism to recognize and understand is **synonymous parallelism**. In it, the second line repeats the sense of the first line, but in different words. For example, consider Ps. 2:1:

Why do the nations conspire,  
 And the peoples plot in vain?

The word translated as “peoples” can describe an ethnic or political unit, so the conspiracy of nations and the peoples’ plotting state the same thought.

**Antithetic parallelism** reinforces the first line from a contrary perspective. In other words, it gets the same idea across by stating something that sounds like the opposite. Here's an example from Ps. 37:9:

For the wicked shall be cut off:  
But those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land.

These lines make the same point from different perspectives: The removal of the wicked from the land takes place in tandem with the installation of the righteous in their place.

A third type of parallelism is one in which the second line advances or intensifies the thought of the first line in a way that is neither synonymous nor antithetical. This is often called “**synthetic**” or “**formal parallelism**.” Consider Isaiah's prayer (Isa. 64:1):

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
That the mountains would tremble before you!

These lines do not repeat the same thought, but the second line suggests the effect of the first: God's ripping of the heavens would cause the mountains to tremble.

Couplets are most common in Hebrew poetry, but triplets or tricola also appear, as in Job 3:5, where Job utters a triple curse on the day of his birth, repeating the same general thought in three different ways:

Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.  
Let clouds settle upon it;  
let the blackness of the day terrify it.

Here, Job echoes the darkness that has settled over his life through three connected metaphors.

As in English, Hebrew poetry is particularly well suited for the expression of both pain and praise, for complaint and questions, for accusations and response. It served well the prophets who pronounced judgment and hope, for the psalmists who offered praise and lament, for the wisdom teachers who spoke in both aphorisms and deep questions.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF PSALMS

The book of Psalms preserves for us a collection of Israel's favorite hymns, both of praise and lament. We should be aware that it is not the only source of psalms, for they can also be found in narrative, prophetic, and wisdom books (e.g., Exod. 15:1-19, Judges 5, 1 Sam. 2:1-10, Jer. 17:5-8, Eccl. 3:1-8).

The Hebrew title of the book is *tehillim*, the plural form of a word meaning "song of praise" or "hymn."

The English name of the book comes from the Septuagint (LXX) title, *Psalmoi*, which is a translation of the Hebrew word *mizmor*, which appears 57 times as the title for a psalm. *Mizmor* means "song," generally of the type that may be accompanied by stringed instruments. The Greek word *psalterion* was also used in reference to psalms, which is why you sometimes hear the book referred to as "the Psalter."

As we have noted, the psalms—many of them, at least—were not only poems, but also songs. Many of the psalms contain superscriptions that indicate the name of a tune, or some sort of instruction for the worship leader.

The psalms were also prayers, and so can be referred to by the Hebrew word *tephillot*, as at the end of Psalm 72, where it reads "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended."

### *Arrangement*

The book of Psalms contains 150 psalms divided into five sections:

- Book 1: 1-41
- Book 2: 42-72
- Book 3: 73-89
- Book 4: 90-10
- Book 5: 107-150

This division is mostly arbitrary except that the second section contains most of the "Elohistic Psalter," which stretches from 42-83 and is distinguished by the use of *Elohim* as the name for God. The division into five sections was probably done as an intentional parallel to the five books of the Torah.

We note that the numbering of the psalms is different in Protestant Bibles, which are based on the accepted Hebrew text, and Catholic/Orthodox Bibles, which follow divisions found in the Greek and Latin translations. To cite one example among several, Psalms 9 and 10 are separate in Hebrew, but one psalm in the Greek translation (LXX). In addition, the LXX adds Psalm 151, which is not found in Protestant Bibles. The Syriac translation contains 155 psalms, some of which have also been found in texts at Qumran.

### ***Authorship***

Who wrote the psalms? Many people consider David, “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:21, KJV), to be the author. There is indeed a tradition that David wrote many of the psalms, but the Bible makes no claim that he wrote them all. Texts such as 1 Chronicles 16, 2 Chron. 29:25-30, and Ezra 3:10 all associate David with the establishment of music as an integral part of Israel’s worship, but he is properly seen as a patron and encourager of Israel’s music and liturgy, not its sole author.

No less than 116 of the psalms have superscriptions in the Hebrew text, including 87 of the first 100. These are old traditions, but not as old as the psalms themselves: They were added by later scribes and should not be considered a part of the original text. In some cases, what appears to be a superscription for one psalm may originally have been a postscript for the previous one. In the LXX, other superscriptions were added to all but the first two psalms. Some superscriptions appear to give instructions to the musicians or song leaders regarding which instrument or tune is to be played.

Among the superscriptions, 101 include attributive names, and *ledawid* appears 73 times. This doesn’t necessarily mean “by David,” however. The Hebrew prefix *l* more typically means “to” or “for,” rather than “by.” It could mean “of” in reference to a collection. Psalms are also attributed to (or for) Asaph (12); the sons of Korah (11); and Solomon (2); plus Heman, Ethan, and Moses (1 each).

### ***Date***

Determining a date for the writing of Psalms is tricky business. Some psalms could be as old as two centuries before David; others may be as late as the fifth century, looking back after the exile. There is more evidence of early Hebrew than late.

The presence of the “Elohistic psalter” makes it clear that the psalms were rather fluid and subject to some changes as time went on. And, a few psalms appear in slightly different form in other parts of the Bible. Psalm 18, for example, also appears in 2 Samuel 22 as a song of David. Jer. 17:5-8 contains much of the same material found in Psalm 1, where it has been transformed into a song.

The appearance of an obvious wisdom teaching as the first psalm could suggest that the wisdom school had some influence on the final shape of the psalter.

### ***Ancient Near Eastern Parallels***

We should point out that psalms and hymns were not unique to Israel. Hymns of various sorts are known from Ugarit, Sumeria, Babylonia, and Egypt. It is often noted, for example, that Psalm 104 has some similarities to the Egyptian Hymn to Aten.

While space does not allow us to provide examples of other hymns from the ancient Near East, readers should be aware that hymnic prayers were not unique to Israel. Occasionally, we may note a similarity of expressions found in Hebrew psalms and poetry from neighboring cultures.

### ***General Characteristics, Theology***

The psalms are not only to be understood as poetry, and as songs, but also as prayers. Most of them address either petitions or complaints to God. A few are addressed to other people, but in order to call upon them to celebrate God's power or to follow God's law.

Some of the psalms are clearly cultic and designed for official occasions, even something like the coronation of a king. Others appear to be very personal, such as the penitent Psalm 51.

Although themes such as wisdom, covenant, repentance, and Torah are often found in the psalms, the central theological theme is the presence of God—either giving thanks for God's presence or pleading for God's presence.

### ***Setting/Function***

What was the function of the psalms in Israel? When and where and how were they used?

We presume that the psalms eventually wound up in Jerusalem and were used in cultic ceremonies through the temple, but some of them may have originated in other settings. For example, Psalm 74 speaks of an exilic setting after the destruction of the temple, and Psalm 81 may have originated in the Northern Kingdom (it speaks much of "Israel"). And, if Psalms 18 and 60 were not written prior to the establishment of the temple, they are designed to appear that way, as prayers of David when he was in a tight spot. A number of the psalms appear to have been composed for particular purposes on special days.

Priests, prophets, wisdom teachers, and other worshipers may have contributed psalms. The emphasis on David's role in promoting music may suggest that collections of psalms first began under David's sponsorship. Others were added later, and they were reorganized.

### ***Types of Psalms***

Hermann Gunkel pioneered the application of form criticism to the psalms. This discipline identifies literary units by type, such as hymns, letters, narratives, legal material, and so forth. Gunkel noted differences between hymns of praise, psalms of lament, wisdom psalms, and others. Our interpretation of a psalm can be influenced by an understanding of its form, or type.

We can identify several major types of psalms, and varieties of related sub-forms within them. Sometimes a single psalm will contain elements of multiple types. And, as one might expect, scholars do not always agree on what psalms belong to what type.

**Hymns and psalms of praise** constitute the largest category. About 74 of the 150 psalms focus on praise to God. They typically begin with a call to praise God, and then list reasons why one should offer praise, often concluding with a closing call to praise. The lessons in this book are drawn from the psalms and hymns of praise. They include examples appropriate for individuals as well as the community.

**Laments** make up the next group. About 56 psalms are of this type, most of them (40) being individual prayers of lamentation, the most frequent single type. These may spring from different contexts. They typically begin with a cry for hearing or expression of certainty that God will hear. They plead with God for deliverance, usually express trust that God will hear their prayer, and offer words of praise in advance of it actually happening. These can also be prayers of an individual or of the community.

**Royal psalms** relate directly to the Davidic dynasty and its rule in Jerusalem. These include Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144.

**Wisdom psalms** reflect Israel's wisdom traditions. These include Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, and 133.

With this great variety of material, the Psalms have something for everyone: psalms for happy days and sad days, confident days and questioning days, days of celebration and days when it seems that God is hiding. As we read how Israel's poets testified of their encounters with God, we find that we have not only gained knowledge of God, but also learned something about ourselves.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (1753), refined by G. Buchanan Gray in *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915).

<sup>2</sup>Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 88.