He will call out to me, "You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Saviour."

And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.

Psalm 89:26,27

What kind of poetry is this?

The psalms don't rhyme and don't have the kind of rhythmic devices we associate with poetry (though they do have a meter of their own). Biblical verse relies mostly on parallelism, rhyming ideas rather than words. The pure form of parallelism expresses an idea in two ways. Psalm 144 has good examples:

> What are human beings that you care for them,
> mere mortals that you think of them?

The first line of psalm 42 represents a special kind of parallelism, known as 'emblematic' or 'comparative' - a literal concept and a figurative illustration are put together ("my soul pants for God like a deer pants for water'). Deer *literally* pant for water, hearts *figuratively* pant for the divine.

Sometimes the two lines express opposite (*antithetical*) ideas to reinforce a point—this is very common in Proverbs (eg 19:16) and Ecclesiastes, but you'll also find it in some psalms (eg 18:27).

Poetry begins early in the Bible. To get an idea of the dramatic verbal intensity of biblical poetry, compare Judges 4 and 5. The same incident, once in prose, once in poetry (read Judges 5:26,27 aloud to see the spoken effect). Try the same comparison with Exodus 14 and 15.

Picture this!

The other main characteristic of Hebrew poetry is the use of strong imagery and figurative language. The psalms belong to an oral tradition, and the use of powerful visual concepts helps to bring the narration alive and enables the singer or reciter to remember them. We have some great examples to enjoy:

"You rule over the surging sea;
when its waves mount up, you still them." - Ps 89

"Part your heavens, Lord, and come down;
touch the mountains, so that they smoke.
Send forth lightning and scatter the enemy;
shoot your arrows and rout them." - Ps 144

Psalm 82 (30 August) - "God" versus "gods"

forefrontcommunitychurch

SUMMER OF PSALMS

Sunday sermon outline **August 2015**

Questioning God in Song

Imagine a single song-book compiled between the time of Shakespeare and now, with songs in a range of styles exploring the full range of human emotions and responses to God. Now imagine that people are still reading, reciting and yes, even singing, those songs, 2,500 years from now!

Although dated a lot earlier, that process describes the Book of Psalms. They were written by multiple authors over roughly 500 years (though, on the face of it, Psalm 90 may be 400 years older still). About half the songs were written by David, others by the family of Asaph, the family of Korah, by Solomon, by the wise men Heman and Ethan … and up to 50 anonymous authors.

The psalms echo these authors' crying out to, or about, God in a range of circumstances. Laments, by individuals and the community. Thanksgiving and songs of joy. Hymns written to praise God, and others to teach about him. Liturgies for special occasions, and poetic accounts of the history of God's people.

One regular theme is that the writers ask questions of, or about, God. These may be rhetorical, to elicit a praise response from the singers—or painfully real, dragged out of the psalmist's heart at a moment of intense risk, loss or longing.

That's how we've chosen to organise our Summer of Psalms—five different questions, by different psalmists at a range of times, in various styles and with varied purposes. Oh yes, and with five different speakers to guide us!

By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me — a prayer to the God of my life.

Psalm 42:8

Psalm 113 (2 August) - as a word cloud

Our five psalms

Please read ahead:

- Psalm 113, 2 August
- Psalm 89, 9 August
- Psalm 144, 16 August
- Psalm 42, 23 August
- Psalm 82, 30 August

Psalm 89 (9 August) - the most frequent words are larger

Psalm 113, Who is like the LORD?

By anonymous authors, psalms 113 to 118 are the prayers of praise memorised and recited by observant Jews at the Passover and on other days of celebration. Called the 'hallel' (Hebrew for 'praise', from which we get the anglicised word *hallelujah*), they are reminders of God's glory, his power and his love for his people - individually and as a community.

Psalm 89, How long will you hide?

Ethan the Ezrahite wrote a fine example of a 'teaching maskil' as a way to communicate his understanding of God's glory and faithfulness to his people. The psalm is Messianic, pointing forward to Jesus's ministry and Second Coming ("I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.") With such a glorious Kingdom to look forward to, Ethan cannot help but digress and ask God how long he's going to wait to bring this about.

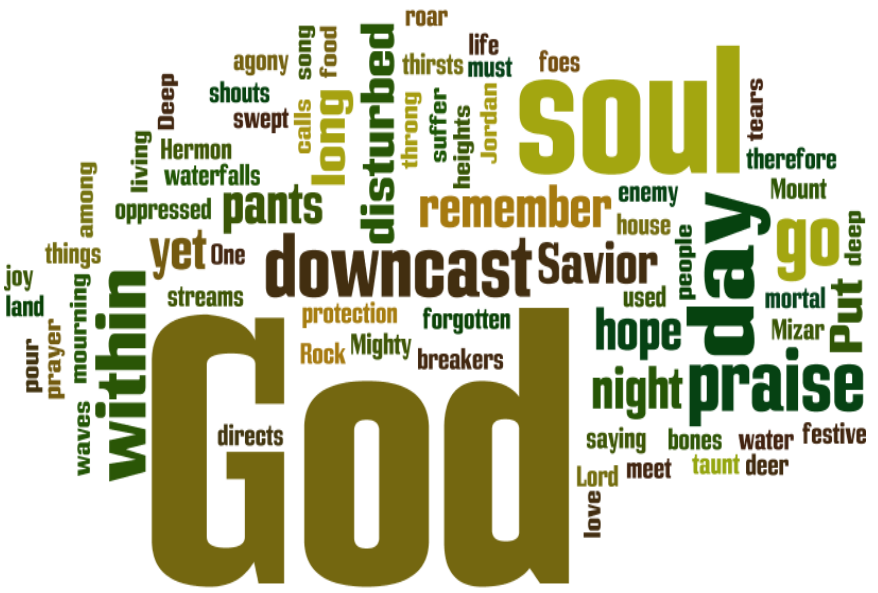
Psalm 144 (16 August) - more hands than the average psalm

Psalm snippets

Several of the psalms are acrostics, meaning that—in the Hebrew original—each stanza or verse begins with one of the 22 Hebrew letters. These are Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145 … and the longest psalm, 119.

The psalms were traditionally divided, some say by the priest Ezra, into "the five books of David". The idea was to reflect the five books of the Law. The saying goes, "Moses gave the path, but David gave the directions."

The psalms are not just poems, but prayers: in words, in awed silence, in groaning and in sighs.



Psalm 42 (23 August) - a psalmist struggles

Psalm 144, What are mortals that you think of them?

Attributed to David, this is a psalm of praise, a "new song" written to encourage God's people to acknowledge God's amazing provision and his right to judge the earth. The song is infused with David's life experience—wars and fortresses from his later life, barns and sheep from his youth. To the musical accompaniment of his 10-string lyre, David exhorts his people to think of God, and acknowledges the miracle of why God, in turn, thinks of them.

A reconstructed "10 stringed harp" based on image in a Jewish coin from the bar Kochba revolt. Source: musi-cofthebible.com

Psalm 42, Where is your God?

Sometimes, things don't work out the way you think they should, Korah's family laments in this 'maskil' (which, incidentally, is one poem along with Ps 43). Bad things happen to individuals. Bad things happen to the people whom God says are his . Bad things happen to the poor, the righteous, the innocent. If God is Love, and all-powerful, why does he allow it? It's not just our 'foes' (v10) who ask —every believer, honestly confronting challenging moments , asks, "Where is God in this?" An inner thirst drives us back to him, yet our soul can still be downcast by the unexpected turn of events.

Psalm 82, How long will you defend the unjust?

See how Asaph fits into David's musical world in 1Chron 6:31– 39. This thunderous declaration of God's justice and mercy stands in the tradition of the Law, which emphasized the virtue of helping widows and orphans; and foreshadows the prophetic denunciations of political and religious power which neglect the weak and vulnerable (eg Isa 58). Unlike the other questions in our series, this one is asked by God, of every human—especially those with enough power to consider themselves 'gods'.

That day David first appointed Asaph and his associates to give praise to the LORD in this manner:

"Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done."

1Chron 16:7,8