



Guide to Reading Psalms



The book of Psalms is an anthology of individual poems. It is important to remember that these are poems to be sung, and thus are to be read differently than, say, a doctrinal or ethical treatise. Because the content of these songs is expressed in a poetic idiom, readers need to be ready to interpret such staples of poetry as image, metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and apostrophe (see chart). All of these factors contribute to the rhetoric of a psalm—the way it enables the singers to own the psalm’s view of the world, and how it shapes their emotional structure so that they can “lean into” the world in a godly manner... readers must begin with the premise that poets present their material in images rather than abstractions, and that they prefer the figurative or nonliteral to the literal.

Term	Explanation	Example
Image	A word or phrase that names a concrete action or thing; by extension, a character, setting, or event in a story is an image—a concrete embodiment of human experience or an idea.	the way (or path); the congregation (or assembly); nature (or harvest) (Psalm 1)
Metaphor	An implied comparison that does not use the formula <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .	“The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1).
Simile	A figure of speech in which a writer compares two things using the formula <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .	“He is like a tree planted by streams of water” (Ps. 1:3).
Personification	A figure of speech in which human attributes are given to something nonhuman, such as animals, objects, or abstract qualities.	Light and truth are personified as guides in Psalm 43:3 .
Hyperbole	A figure of speech in which a writer consciously exaggerates for the sake of effect; usually that effect is emotional, and thus, loosely put, hyperbole usually expresses emotional truth rather than literal truth.	“My tears have been my food day and night” (Ps. 42:3).
Apostrophe	A figure of speech in which the writer addresses someone absent as though present and capable of responding. By slight extension, an apostrophe might be an address to something nonhuman as though it were human and capable of responding, even if the speaker is in the presence of the object.	The poet in Psalm 148:3 might well be looking up at the sun, moon, or stars as he commands them to praise God.