

### 33. Introducing the Psalms

Psalms 101-102





# Naming God

God's sacred 'name' ('HaShem'): the Hebrew word יהוה [YHWH]



This is a personal address for God, generally regarded as a verbal form derived from the root היה (hyh): 'to be/to cause to be'.





‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians’ (Exodus 3:7-8).

Moses was the one chosen to carry out God’s will and God assured him: ‘I will be **[אֶהְיֶה]** with you’ (Exodus 3:12).

Moses wanted to know God’s name but had to be content with knowing that **אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה** (Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν):

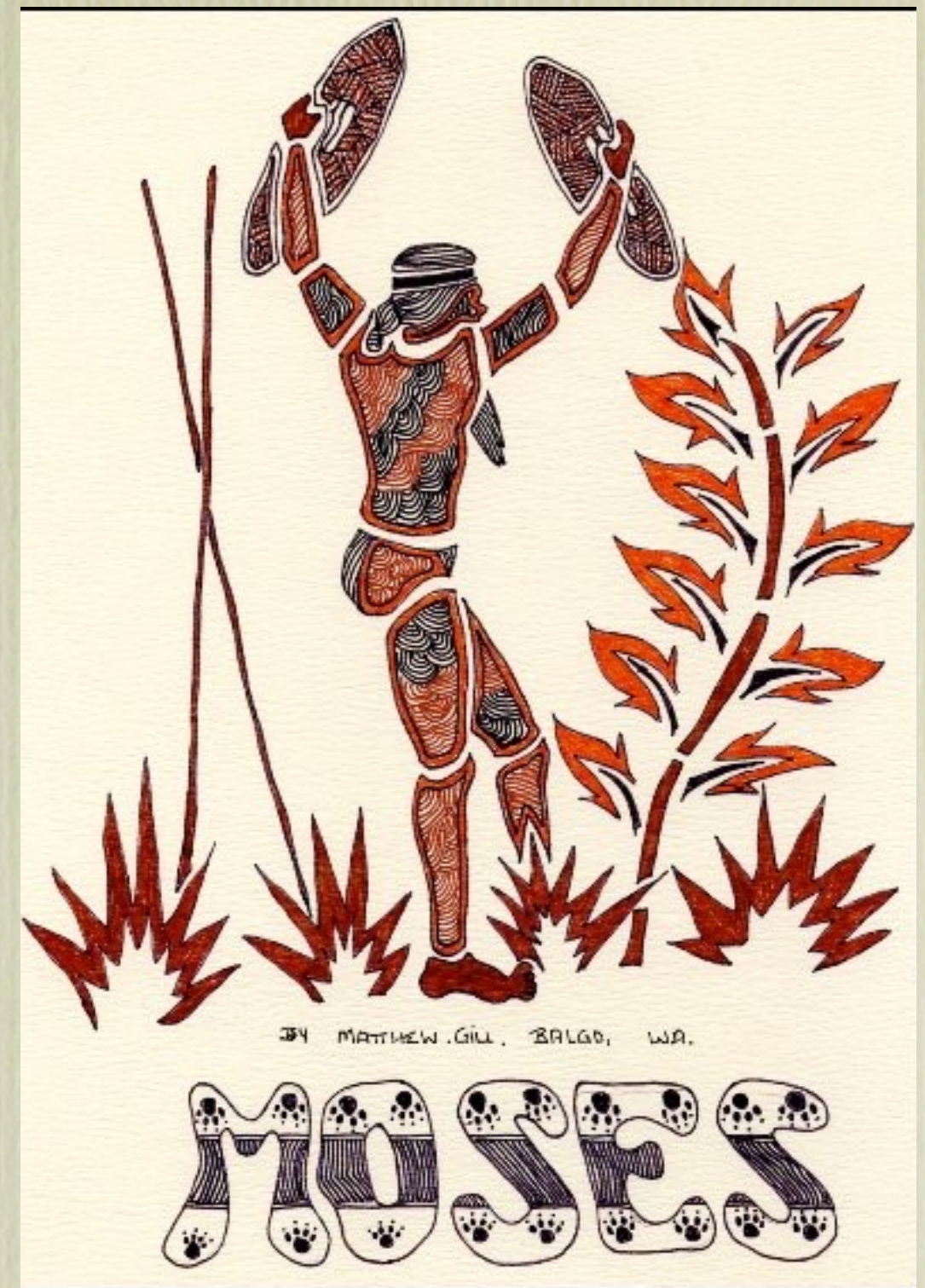
‘I will be who I will be’. ‘You shall say to the Israelites, “I will

be **[אֶהְיֶה]**, has sent me to you ... **יְהוָה** [YHWH], the

God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”. This is my name forever’ (Exodus 3:14-15).



Whenever the psalmists write **יהוה** the scene of the burning bush is meant to come to mind, and so the image of a God who is determined to liberate us from slavery, indeed from anything that stops us 'living to the full' (John 10:10), in intimate communion with God and so in a rich and truthful relationship with creation, especially with the people who inhabit our lives.





Throughout this translation God is referred to as follows as

God translates the Hebrew word for God (usually 'Elohim / 'El).

GOD (upper case) translates the Hebrew יהוה (YHWH) (758 times)

{ יהוה Spoken: אֲדֹנָי ('Adonai) = 'Κύριος' = LORD }

When GOD is being addressed,  
I have sometimes replaced GOD with YOU.

God\* translates the Hebrew word for lord ('Adonai). (38 times)

Whatever translation we use for Hebrew יהוה, we should keep in mind that the word יהוה (YHWH) points to the mystery of a God who is infinitely beyond all our human titles, but who nevertheless is intimately close to us.



# Psalm

The word 'psalm' comes from the Greek verb psallein, meaning to pluck a stringed instrument with the fingers.

Later it was used more generally for 'to make music' or 'to sing'.

psalterion is a harp.

psalmos refers to the plucking with the fingers, and later to the song plucked in this way.



Sing psalms (*ψαλμος*) and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody (*ψάλλοντες*) to the Lord in your hearts' (Ephesians 5:19).



Jesus speaks of the Book of Psalms in Luke 20:42: 'David himself says in the book of Psalms, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand".',

and again in Luke 24:44: 'Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.'



- Some of the psalms are not so much prayers as reflections on God's action in creation and in the history of the people of Israel, or on the meaning of life, or on the advantages of living in accordance with the covenant
- Others celebrate the position of the king and Jerusalem and the temple in the life of the people.
- Most of the psalms, however, are prayers addressed to God which found their way into, or were composed for, the liturgical prayer of the community of ancient Israel and Judah.



The psalmists did not know Jesus. Their image of God is sometimes very different from that of Jesus. Jesus did not see God as a warlord who can be called on to destroy enemies. Jesus did not see God as consumed with vengeance, as punishing sin, as controlling.

I have attempted to leave out sentiments that Jesus could not have prayed, so that we, as Christians, can continue the ancient tradition of adapting the psalms in the light of new experience. In this case it is the experience of Jesus.



# Praying Psalm 101 with Jesus





<sup>1</sup>I sing of covenant love and right judgment.

To you, O GOD (יְהוָה), I make music.

<sup>2</sup>I live the truth I sing, as I come before you.

I show my royal household how to live a perfect life.

<sup>3</sup>I do not admire anything dishonourable.

I hate the ways of the wicked.

They will never attach themselves to me.

<sup>4</sup>Perverseness of heart will be far from me.

I want nothing to do with evil.

<sup>5</sup>I silence anyone who secretly slanders a neighbour.

I do not tolerate a haughty look or an arrogant heart.



<sup>6</sup>I look with favour on the faithful in the land.

Only they will share my palace.

Only those whose lives are upright  
have a place in my service.

<sup>7</sup>No one who practises fraud  
shall remain in my house.

No one who utters lies  
shall continue in my presence.

<sup>8</sup>Morning by morning

I put down the wicked in the land,  
excluding all who do evil from the city of GOD.



The king is promising God to govern with justice. Psalm 99 acknowledges GOD as a God of Justice: ‘Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob’ (Psalm 99:4). Psalm 100 celebrates the fact that God’s justice is everlasting: ‘GOD is good; God’s covenant love endures forever. God’s faithfulness to all generations’ (Psalm 100:5). Here in Psalm 101 the psalmist declares that this exercise of justice is realised through the governing of the king.

**<sup>1</sup>I sing of covenant love and right judgment.**

Verse 1 speaks of right judgment when it is founded on covenant love. This is the way a ruler in Israel is expected to judge.



‘Loving kindness and faithfulness preserve the king, and his throne is upheld by covenant love’ (Proverbs 20:28).

‘What does GOD require of you but to make right judgments, to be committed to covenant love, and to walk humbly with your God?’ (Micah 6:8).

‘Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with fairness (en epieikeia) and with great forbearance you govern us; for you have power to act whenever you choose. Through such works you have taught your people that the righteous must be kind’ (Wisdom 12:18-19).

The Greek epieikeia is a basic quality expected of a person who pronounces judgment. Epieikeia is the wise application of the law by a judge who takes all circumstances into consideration and exercises justice with compassion and loving kindness.



In the New Testament epieikeia is frequently translated 'gentle'.

'Be gentle and show every courtesy to everyone' (Titus 3:2).

'The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy' (James 3:17).



In verses 3-5 and again in verses 7-8 the king promises to rid the government of anyone who is not committed to the covenant love that is the foundation of justice.

<sup>3</sup>I do not admire anything dishonourable.

I hate the ways of the wicked.

They will never attach themselves to me.

<sup>4</sup>Perverseness of heart will be far from me.

I want nothing to do with evil.

<sup>5</sup>I silence anyone who secretly slanders a neighbour.

I do not tolerate a haughty look or an arrogant heart.

<sup>7</sup>No one who practises fraud shall remain in my house.

No one who utters lies shall continue in my presence.

<sup>8</sup>Morning by morning I put down the wicked in the land,  
excluding all who do evil from the city of GOD.



In verse 6 he describes the qualities he expects of those who share his power.

‘I look with favour on the faithful in the land.  
Only they will share my palace.  
Only those whose lives are upright  
have a place in my service.



This is an excellent psalm for anyone who exercises power in the community, both in the Church and in the State. As we pray it with Jesus we hear him say: 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:29). Paul appeals to the Christians in Corinth 'by the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (2 Corinthians 10:1). He lists 'gentleness' among the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:23). He appeals to the Gentile Christians to be humble, gentle and patient (Ephesians 4:2), and to the Christians of Philippi: 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone' (Philippians 4:5).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us pray to share his gentleness, especially in our judgments.



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To you, O GOD, I make music.

<sup>2</sup>I live the truth I sing, as I come before you.  
I show my royal household  
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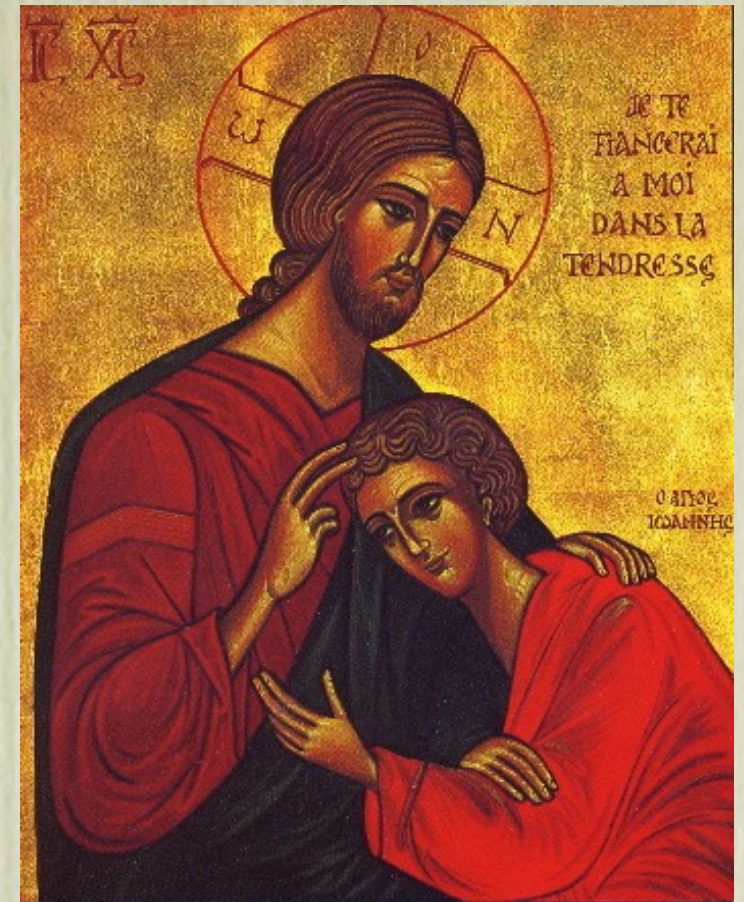
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## Psalm 101





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Only those whose lives are upright  
have a place in my service.

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I put down the wicked in the land,  
excluding all who do evil from the city of GOD.



# Praying Psalm 102 with Jesus





<sup>1</sup>Hear my prayer, O GOD, let my pleading reach you.

<sup>2</sup>Do not hide your face in my hour of need.

Listen to me; answer me speedily when I call.

<sup>3</sup>For my days dissolve like smoke,  
my bones burn like a furnace.

<sup>4</sup>My heart withers like grass. I am too weak to eat,

<sup>5</sup>so consumed am I with grief. I am all skin and bone.

<sup>6</sup>I am like a bird in the wilderness,  
like a young owl haunting the ruins.

<sup>7</sup>I lie awake and moan.

I am like a solitary bird on the rooftop.

<sup>8</sup>All day long my enemies taunt me.

They use my name to curse me.

<sup>9</sup>I eat ashes for bread, and mingle tears with my drink.



<sup>11</sup>My days are like a lengthening shadow.

I wither away like grass.

<sup>12</sup>But you, O GOD, reign for ever.

Your name endures from one generation to the next.

<sup>13</sup>Rise up! Have compassion on Zion,

for it is time to favour us with your grace.

<sup>14</sup>Your servants hold dear its stones, and cherish even its dust.

<sup>15</sup>Nations will fear YOU, kings will be in awe of your glory.

<sup>16</sup>GOD, when you rebuild the walls of Zion,

you will appear in glory.

<sup>17</sup>You hear the prayer of the destitute.

You do not despise their plea.

<sup>18</sup>Write this down for a future generation,

so that a people yet unborn may praise GOD.

<sup>19</sup>GOD watches from heaven, observing the earth.



<sup>20</sup>GOD hears the groans of the prisoners,  
and sets free those condemned to die.

<sup>21</sup>They chant GOD's name in Zion, GOD's praise in Jerusalem.

<sup>22</sup>There peoples and kingdoms gather to worship GOD (יְהוָה).

<sup>24</sup>I say, 'My God (אֱלֹהֵי), do not take me away.

My life is only half spent,  
while you endure throughout all generations.'

<sup>25</sup>Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

<sup>26</sup>They will perish, but you endure.

They will all wear out like a garment.

You change them like clothing, and throw them away;

<sup>27</sup>but you are the same. Your years will never end.

<sup>28</sup>May your servant's line last for ever.

May our children grow strong under your gaze.



## *Omitted*

*<sup>10</sup>because of your indignation and anger; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.*

*<sup>23</sup>God has broken my strength in my prime and cut short my days.*

The omitted verses are written on the assumption that God controls whatever happens to us.

God's 'anger' is God's passionate concern for justice. God's initiative is always to put things right.

We bring upon ourselves and others terrible things when we reject God's inspiration and act against the truth. This terrible situation (this 'anger') is 'of God' in the sense that it is related to God and is the result of our failure to welcome God's grace and live in God's Love.

Talk of divine anger reminds us that God hates sin, and that we should hate sin as that which cuts us off from God, the source of life and of all that is good.



This psalm offers us waves of lyrical poetry of excellent quality. In verses 1-12 the psalmist is pleading with God at a time of intense personal suffering. The threat of premature death in mid-life is seen against the eternity of God (verses 11-12). We are mortal, but God is immortal. It is in God that we place our hope. Compare the following.

‘Our years come to an end like a sigh.

Even if we live seventy years, or eighty if we are strong,  
life is toil and trouble;  
the years soon pass, and we are gone’ (Psalm 90:9-10).

‘I am gone like a shadow at evening’ (Psalm 109:23).

‘We are like a breath; our days like a passing shadow’ (Psalm 144:4).



As we pray verses 1-12 with Jesus we think of the many times when he could pray **'All day long my enemies taunt me'** (verse 8). At his baptism in the Jordan he experienced an overwhelming sense of being loved by God. This was at the heart of his mission. He realised that it is our failure to know how loved we are that is at the heart of our temptation to despair of meaning as we attempt to eke out an existence as best we can. Jesus brought God's love to us in ways that gave authority to his message and power to his healing. But it wasn't long before he experienced resistance, especially from the religious leaders. Quite early in his ministry we read: 'The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him' (Mark 3:6). It is especially in his final suffering and death that we can hear him praying these words of Psalm 102.



<sup>13</sup>Have compassion on Zion, for it is time to favour us with your grace.'

The focus on personal suffering widens to a plea for Jerusalem (Zion). The Hebrew verb translated here as 'have compassion' is from the root *ṣḥm*. 'Favour with grace' translates the Hebrew *ḥanan*. These two ideas are often found together in the Bible, along with the word *ḥesed* (covenant love).



<sup>14</sup>Your servants hold dear its stones.

The psalmist speaks of the love that the people have for the city, even its very stones. Jesus' love for Jerusalem ('Zion') is apparent. Luke writes (19:41-44): 'As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, "If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognise the time of your visitation from God."



<sup>16</sup>GOD, when you rebuild the walls of Zion, you will appear in glory.

Praying this psalm with Jesus we think of the call to rebuild the Church – a call that needs to be heard by each generation, so that the Church will be seen for what it is: the Body of Christ revealing God's love to the world. Saint Francis of Assisi was one who heard this call. He responded with generosity. His example inspires us, for we are all called to play our part in this.

<sup>17</sup>You hear the prayer of the destitute. You do not despise their plea.

These words echo Psalm 22, the psalm placed on the lips of Jesus on the cross: 'He did not despise or scorn the condition of this wretch; he did not hide his face from me, but heard me when I cried to him' (Psalm 22:24).



<sup>18</sup>Write this down for a future generation,  
so that a people yet unborn may praise GOD.

Psalm 78 expresses the same desire. There the psalmist insists on the importance of handing on the traditions that remind us of ‘the glorious deeds of God.’

Listen, O my people, to my teaching; attend to the words I speak.  
I speak of what we have heard from of old,  
what we have known from our ancestors.  
We must not keep it from our children;  
we must tell the coming generation of the glorious deeds of GOD,  
who established a law in Israel and commanded our ancestors  
to make it known to their children,  
so that future generations would know it,  
and grow up to teach it to their young.



<sup>20</sup>GOD hears the groans of the prisoners,  
and sets free those condemned to die.

Compare: 'God gives the desolate a home, leads prisoners to freedom' (Psalm 68:6).

'GOD hears the needy, and does not despise those who are in bonds' (Psalm 69:33).

'Let the groans of the prisoners come before you. According to your great power preserve those doomed to die' (Psalm 79:11).



<sup>25</sup>Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

<sup>26</sup>They will perish, but you endure.

They will all wear out like a garment.

You change them like clothing, and throw them away;

<sup>27</sup>but you are the same. Your years will never end.

Verses 25-27 are quoted in the New Testament in the Letter to the Hebrews 1:10-12. The author is making the point that the risen and exalted Jesus shares in the eternal life of God. He ‘endures’. His ‘years will never end.’



## Psalm 102

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<sup>2</sup>Do not hide your face in my hour of need.

Listen to me; answer me speedily when I call.

<sup>3</sup>For my days dissolve like smoke,  
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<sup>6</sup>I am like a bird in the wilderness,  
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May our children grow strong under your gaze.





## A Trusting Psalm